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# *Viking Fire*

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*PhD, Creative Writing, March  
2018*

Declaration of Authorship I, Justin Dominic Hill, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed:

Date:

# Abstract

This PhD thesis consists of part of historical novel, *Viking Fire*, and an accompanying critical thesis. The novel recounts the life of Harald Sigurdson, King of Norway (c. 1015 – 25 September 1066) better known by his posthumous nickname Harald Hardrada. The work was published by Little, Brown, on September 22nd, 2016 and was selected by The Times as one of their Books of the Year, 2016.

The critical essay will follow the novel. It is structured into four chapters. Chapter One will explain the initial inspiration for the series of novels and will examine how I navigated the major sources for the period and combined them with non-contemporaneous material in my creative process. Chapter Two will provide the theoretical framework for this thesis, reviewing some of the major theoretical modellings of the historical novel, address how the historical novel fits into a larger body of historical writing, and how the historical novel negotiates the patchy historical record. Chapter Three is designed to illustrate and explore further some of the theoretical models related in Chapter Two and, more importantly, to allow me to trace, selectively, some of the literary-historical developments of the historical novel in Britain, how the selected novelists responded to what might be called ‘the historical sublime’, how they brought a sense of verisimilitude to their work, and how they represented their own research for their novels. Chapter Four is a personal essay which deals at length with my aims and inspiration as a writer, the positioning of the novel, how I created a fictional Harald Hardrada, and the linguistic choices I made for the novel. Finally, this chapter will examine how this critical thesis informed the creative part of this thesis, and altered my own reaction to the historical sublime, that is the effect produced by the lack of evidence that the past presents to us.

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## Introduction

*Viking Fire*, my creative work, is the second novel in a projected quartet, which will re-examine in fictional form the popular narratives that surround the Battle of Hastings in 1066. The first of this projected series was *Shieldwall*,<sup>1</sup> which was concerned with the life of historical figure Godwin Wulfnothson, during the latter years of the reigns of Ethelred II (978–1013 and 1014–1016). The other planned books will be *Hastings*, which will chronicle the years 1064-1066, and lastly, *Conqueror*, which will explore the legacy of the Norman Conquest and William the Conqueror's final days.

*Viking Fire*, the second of the series, is part Bildungsroman and part tragic tale of the life of Harald Sigurdson, King of Norway (c. 1015 – 25 September 1066) better known now by his posthumous nickname Harald Hardrada. The published work is 115,000 words, narrated primarily in the first person, past tense voice of Harald Hardrada. A 68,000-word selection is included here as my Creative Thesis. The book starts with Archbishop Ealdred (†11 September 1069), the putative chronicler, answering a request by Harald's daughter for the return of her father's bones. His rambling style continues into a record he made of the stories that Harald Sigurdson, King of Norway, told him in the five days between meeting at the Battle of Fulford Gate (September 20th, 1066) and his death at the Battle of Stamford Bridge (25<sup>th</sup> September, 1066). The novel is divided into four parts: *Norway*, *The Middle Sea*, *Constantinople*, *The North*. Norway deals with his early life and exile east into the lands of Rus (c.1015-1036). The Middle Sea chronicles his arrival at Constantinople and entry into service with the Varangian Guard there, which took him across the Mediterranean to Sicily and Jerusalem (c. 1036-1041). Constantinople focusses on his time as Captain of the Emperor's bodyguard (c.1041) and the consequences of being drawn into the Byzantine political machinations. The North deals with the last twenty years of his life when he returns to Norway, makes himself king in 1046, comes to terms with his relationship with his brother, and is finally killed at the Battle of Stamford Bridge (25<sup>th</sup> September, 1066). The work was published by Little, Brown, on September 22nd, 2016 and was chosen by *The Times* as a Book of the Year, 2016 (Senior, 2016, p.9).

There is also a critical thesis, consisting of four chapters. Chapter One will explain the initial inspiration for the series of novels. It will examine how I navigated the major sources for the period and combined them with non-contemporaneous material in my creative process. Chapter Two will provide the theoretical framework for this thesis,

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<sup>1</sup> Justin Hill, *Shieldwall* (2011).

reviewing some of the major theoretical modellings of the historical novel. The chapter will examine the foundations laid out by Georg Lukács, and Hayden White, and will trace how their ideas were developed and expanded upon by later writers. It will examine how the historical novel fits into the larger body of historical writing and also how the historical novel negotiates the sublimity of the patchy historical record. It will also go on to argue that rather than being a nineteenth-century innovation, the historical novel is an evolution of the wider tradition of historical narratives that can be traced back to before Defoe. Chapter Three will be a selective analytical engagement with five historical novels from Scott to the present day, in part to illustrate theories related in Chapter Two. I will chart the broad changes and characteristics of the genre from its origins with Scott, through the nineteenth century, with Lytton and Morris; and then into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with Renault and Mantel. The thesis will illustrate how considerations of legitimacy has broadened beyond a core set of historical texts to include fields of research that did not exist in Scott, Lytton or Morris' times, such as archaeology, psychology, and social and gender studies, and how the expectations of readers and writers have changed the historical novel accordingly. It will also observe how historical research itself changed. Chapter Four is a personal essay illustrating the choices made to bring an eleventh century narrative to a twenty-first century audience. It will show the character of Harald was created in response to the biases and gaps within the sources. And it will reflect on the language I used to carry this narrative with direct reference to my own work. Finally, it will return to address the way that the historical novel fits into the larger tradition of historiographical writings, and how it responds to the historical sublime.



# Critical Thesis

## *Viking Fire: A Practical and Theoretical Exploration of the Historical Novel*

## CHAPTER ONE

### **‘Through a glass darkly’: Imagining the Life of Harald Hardrada**

This chapter will set out the initial inspiration and goals for the Conquest Series of novels, of which the creative component, *Viking Fire*, is the second. It will also examine the sources available during research and the challenges of negotiating them. I shall examine the methods that I used to create this piece of fiction, how the process was transformed throughout the writing of the book, and how the approaches of other historical novelists informed my own methods.

I have broken the chapter down into two sections, the first of which, *Towards a Better Understanding of 1066*, will survey the available sources for 1066 and will trace how the Norman Conquest has been commonly viewed throughout history; *Sources* will examine what sources were available for the life of Harald Hardrada, how I used them.

### **Towards a Better Understanding of 1066**

In 2011 Queen Elizabeth made a state visit to Ireland, the first by a reigning British monarch since Irish independence in 1919. In its coverage of the event the Telegraph noted that ‘a minority of strong nationalists’ wanted ‘an abject apology for ‘800 years of English oppression.’ There is much wrong with this - and any - simplistic notion of history (FitzGerald, 2014). As noted in the Telegraph, (Kenny, 2011), this statement shows a historical misunderstanding, specifically of the role of the Normans in Britain. Ireland was not conquered or even invaded in 1169 by the English, but by the Norman nobleman, Richard ‘Strongbow’ de Clare.<sup>1</sup> However, what this statement does exemplify is how national mythologies of the nations of the British Isles have developed from this period, and remained strong, despite the evidence to the contrary.

The events of 1066 and the Battle of Hastings are of undoubted significance. As historian Michael Wood states, ‘As a result of a single day’s fighting England received a new royal dynasty, a new nobility, a new church, a new art and architecture, and a new language of government’ (1986, p.159). A recent study showed that people with an etymologically Norman, Breton or Flemish surname are still ‘statistically significantly

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<sup>1</sup> In this period of history, kings and nobility were still distinctively Norman. While it is not known if Roger spoke English, the contemporary king, Henry II (5 March 1133 – 6 July 1189), understood but did not speak Middle English (Harper-Bill and Vincent, 2007, p.326).

overrepresented' at Oxford and Cambridge Universities over students with lower-status artisanal 'English' surnames (Clark & Cummins, 2014, pp .517-537). While the social implications for the majority of English are a matter of debate, the linguistic and literary implications are clear: Norman French became the language of government, English ceased to be a written language, and much of the five-hundred-year corpus of Old English literature, in dialects ranging from Northumbrian to West Saxon, was lost or discarded. Native British and French stories of King Arthur were promoted by a Norman-French elite to the detriment of a native Anglo-Saxon mythological tradition, which largely died out. In the nineteenth century, while other European scholars such as Elias Lönnrot or Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm collected a rich corpus of native folktale and mythology from their respective countries, English scholars found little native English material. It was a sense of national loss that inspired authors, such as J.R.R. Tolkien (Shippey, 2000, p.232), to rework scant native material into a national foundation myth, the initial inspiration for his Middle Earth (Tolkien, 1981, p.144).

In some ways, however, the Norman Conquest itself had become a foundation myth. Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton likened the tale to the *Iliad* (1896, p.550). Still now, English kings and queens are numbered, not from the Anglo-Saxon kings, who are typically known by their cognomens, but from William the Conqueror onwards. The subliminal message is that the modern royals owe their legitimacy to William; that the country's history began with his reign.

While the importance of the Battle of Hastings cannot be overestimated, the drama of that single day has overshadowed the events that surrounded it, leaving it stranded within the national timeline. It is common knowledge what happened, but it is much less well known why Hastings happened, what events and choices led towards it, or even, what else might have happened, had chance been tilted differently. To compound this lack of comprehension, the Norman Conquest has typically been approached through the prism of hindsight bias, and specifically the tropes either of the 'Norman yoke' (Chibnall, 1969-73, pp.202-3) popularised in Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1820), or the opposite viewpoint put forward by Thomas Carlyle in his *History of Friedrich II of Prussia* (1858, para. 50 of 201):

England...still howls and execrates lamentably over its William Conqueror, and rigorous line of Normans...but without them...what had it ever been? A gluttonous race of Jutes and Angles capable of no grand combinations; lumbering about in pot-bellied equanimity; not dreaming of heroic toil and silence and endurance.

One of the principal challenges in writing about this period is the paucity and limitations of the available sources. We do not have any reliable primary sources of the kind that modern historians prefer to base their accounts upon, no eyewitness accounts, diaries, or images that other periods provide, and very little archaeological evidence. What we do have are written sources, which themselves are unreliable witnesses (Fleming, 2010, p.xix). The main traditions that inform modern scholarship are those derived from English and Norman sources (Barlow, 2002, pp.9-13). The Norman narrative is that the saintly King Edward promised the throne to William, that Harold usurped the throne and that he was ultimately killed in battle by an arrow in the eye. As Barlow speculates, the Norman version of events was ‘a justification for the conquest of England prepared by William’s advisers in 1066 for circulation among the rulers of Europe and particularly directed at the pope’, and tells a story within which ‘Godwin and his son Harold are villains’ (2002, p.9). As well as being ‘scanty’ Barlow believes the sources are ‘heavily biased’ (2002, p.16-17).

The Norman sources were brought together in the twelve-volume *Ecclesiastical History* of Odo of Clugny, an Anglo-Norman monk in a Norman abbey, writing in the first decades of the twelfth century. Odo’s sympathies, like his nationality, are split. He laments the legacy of William, putting into the dying king’s mouth the confession: ‘I have persecuted its native inhabitants beyond all reason; innumerable multitudes, especially in the county of York, perished through me by famine or the sword’ (Greenaway, et al. 1996, p.295). But Odo also repeats the essential details of the Norman version that Harold and the English needed to be punished for their sins. This teleological argument reflects contemporaneous notions that battles were decided by the will of God. The obvious verdict of the Battle of Hastings, in which three Godwinsons are killed, mutes many of the English sources, or colours their accounts. The void of other sources means that ‘twelfth-century English historians, such as William of Malmesbury, owing to the thinness of the English sources, had perforce to accept in the main the Norman story’ (Barlow, 2002, p.16-17). This void has meant that the ‘official’ Norman version of events has continued to influence debate around the subject up to this day.

There are many other examples of Thomas Carlyle’s opinion of the Anglo-Saxons. F.W. Maitland characterises the English as ‘an unwieldy host of men’ whose military science rose to no higher concept than ‘the stationary tactics of a phalanx of

axemen', with a final moral judgement upon them, that they were 'a decadent nation...on the outer fringe of European politics' (1897, p.156), H.W.C Davis said 'nothing short of the most desperate odds could have prevented the superiority of Norman tactics and equipment' (1905, p.1), and even prominent Anglo-Saxon historian Frank Stenton wrote: 'In action, Harold's army could only function as infantry, confined by its nature to a type of warfare which was already obsolete in the greater part of Western Europe' (1943, p.576). But, as Richard Glover notes, 'the inevitability of Norman victory, which was so obvious to Mr Davis, was far less apparent to Duke William' (1952, p.1).

Despite counter-arguments, the Norman version of events remains resistant to criticism. In the *History of Britain*, TV series, Schama (2000, 7.02-7.35) states:

We tend to think of Edward the Confessor as the quintessential Anglo-Saxon king. In fact, he was almost as Norman as William the Conqueror...he'd lived here in Normandy for almost 30 years ever since [his mother] brought him as a child refugee from the wars between the Saxons and the Danes...Normandy ... was the place which formed him politically and culturally. His mother tongue was Norman French and his virtual godfathers were the formidable dukes of Normandy.

While our sources are too threadbare to make confident statements, I would take issue with a number of the assertions made here. Edward was not exiled to Normandy until sixteen years of age, and until his exile probably had no expectation of living anywhere but England. While his mother's tongue was Norman French, his mother tongue was not. It is also unlikely that Normandy would be his cultural home. Whilst in exile he spent as much of his time in Mantes with his sister and her husband, Drogo, Count of the Vexin, as he did in Normandy; and his feelings towards Duke William were probably much less warm than is traditionally assumed, especially after 1063, when William killed Edward's nephew Walter III, in captivity. But Schama is coming up against the same problem as William of Malmesbury: myth falls on fertile ground when there is an absence of evidence, and a lack of alternatives force him to use the Norman sources for his coordinates. The essential points of these versions, that Edward the Confessor promised the throne to William and that Harold Godwinson was a usurper, remain in almost all popular historical accounts, even though Anglo-Saxon kings were not designated by their predecessors, but by the choice of the Witan, which had the right to '*ceosan to cyninge*' (Lieberman, 1913, p.21). As Ælfric of Eynsham wrote in the late tenth century:

No man can make himself king, but the people has the choice to choose as king whom they please; but after he is consecrated as king, he then has dominion over the people, and they cannot shake his yoke off their necks (Whitelock, 1956, p.640-42).

Contrary to the Norman account, these facts establish Harold as the legitimate English king by the law of the land. A fact that is glossed over by the myth.

My initial research on the period was focussed on the events of 1066 following on the work of modern historians, such as Michael Wood, who has a special interest in the legacy of the Anglo-Saxon state, Frank Stenton, author of the Oxford History of England *Anglo-Saxon England*, whose work lays the foundation for the study of the period, and Frank Barlow, a leading expert in the reigns of Edward the Confessor and the Godwin family. Through their work, it was clear that the events of 1066 are part of a much larger story, of which the real beginning is during the reign of Ethelred the Unready (c. 966–1016), and that resulted in the Danish Conquest, of 1016. As Fletcher (2002, p.1) notes, ‘Everyone knows what happened in 1066...Fewer people, outside the ranks of professional historians, are aware that the Norman Conquest was the second conquest of the kingdom of England in the eleventh century.’

My initial ambition shifted from a single book to a series that covered the principal characters of the period and expanded and reframed the traditional narrative, popularising some of the modern scholarship on the period. The first book in this series was *Shieldwall* (Hill, 2011), which is concerned with the life of historical figure Godwin Wulfnothson during the latter years of Ethelred II, the Unready. It showed how Viking raids (991-1016) broke the traditional strong bonds between the Wessex royal family and nobility, and led to a breakdown of social cohesion and identity that resulted in the Danish Conquest. It also put forward a possible explanation for the mysterious rise of Godwin, from probably being the son of Sussex thegn, Wulnoth Cild (Barlow, 2002, p.24-5), to being the earl of Wessex and regent of England. The second book in the series is *Viking Fire*, and this contributes to the creative component of this thesis. *Viking Fire* is part Bildungsroman and part tragic tale of the life of Harald Sigurdson, King of Norway (c. 1015 – 25 September 1066), better known now by his posthumous nickname Harald Hardrada.

Harald is often described as ‘The Last Viking’, and his death is often taken to mark the end of the Viking Age. Of course, the word Viking itself is a nineteenth century ‘historians’ revival’ (Online Etymological Dictionary, 2018). In Harald’s time it described an activity rather than an ethnic identity, and was also a

pejorative word, translating roughly as ‘freebooting, piracy’, certainly not what Harald would have used to describe himself.

In contemporary culture Vikings are popularly dismissed as a ‘cheerful, bloody diversion for the kids on a wet bank-holiday afternoon’ (Williams, 2017, p.xvii), or as ‘cartoon savages who had a short-lived cameo rampaging around in the gloomy interlude between the end of Roman Britain and the Norman Conquest’ (2017, p.xviii). Compounding this diminishing, in the events of 1066, Harald Hardrada is typically seen as a footnote to the main events, which happen between Harold Godwinson and Duke William of Normandy, having died, six weeks earlier, at the Battle of Stamford Bridge. But as an adventurer through the river systems of modern Russia, a successful mercenary in the Byzantine Empire’s Varangian Guard, leading a veteran army, it seems reasonable to argue that Harald was the most likely candidate to win that year, against Harold and William, who had previously fought only skirmishes. It is partly to rectify these biases that this novel was written.

## Written Sources

Harald Hardrada’s life is well documented by the standards of his time, with mentions of his name by a number of writers located thousands of miles apart and in a variety of languages (Blöndal, 2007, p.57)<sup>2</sup>. In England, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records his invasion of England in 1066, while in Constantinople the Byzantine *Λογος σουθετητικος* (*Advice for the Emperor*, attributed to Kekaumenos, c. 1050) records Harald’s service. In these sources he is, as he is in many contemporary accounts of the eleventh century, a walk-on character. It is *Heimskringla* (‘the circle of the world’), a collection of sagas written by Snorri Sturluson (1179 – 1241) upon which we rely for a story within which Harald is the leading man.

*Heimskringla* chronicles the history of Norway from prehistoric times through the lives of the legendary figures in the times of Odin, through semi-mythical Norwegian kings up to Harald Fine-Hair (c 860) where ‘proper history begins’ (Magnus and

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<sup>2</sup> As well as the sources referred to here, Blöndal notes that Harald’s adventures are chronicled by Theodoric the Monk (*Monumenta Historiae Norvegiase*, ed. G. Storm, Christiana, 1880, 57) Saxon (*Gesta*, ed. J. Raeder, A. Olrik and F. Blatt, Copenhagen, 1931-57, 1, 305ff.) and William of Malmesbury (*De Gestis Regum Anglorum*, ed. W. Stubbs (Rolls Series), London, 1997-9, II, 318), (Blöndal, 2007).

Palsson, 1966, p.12). The section which deals with Harald follows on from that of his brother, St Olaf (1016-30) and Olaf's son, Magnus the Good (1035-47), which merges into Harald's reign (1046-66). In compiling his account of Harald's life, Snorri was drawing on a number of other written sources that included *Ágrip*, a brief history of Norwegian kings from the ninth to the twelfth centuries; *Morkinskinna* ('Mouldy Vellum'), an early thirteenth-century composite of sagas of individual kings from 1030, and the death of St Olaf, to the twelfth century; and *Fagrskinna* ('Fair Vellum'), a similar compilation written by an Icelander living in Norway (Magnus and Palsson, 1966, p.24). But Snorri was also the inheritor of a large body of oral anecdotes through his ancestor Halldór Snorrason (†1055), one of Harald's closest retainers<sup>3</sup> which Blöndal believes, originally made up *Útferðarsaga Haralds konungs*, a saga recounting Harald's exploits in the east, which was not written down, or lost, by the time that *Morkinskinna*, *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* were composed (Blöndal, 2007, p.211). In addition to the drawing on Icelandic oral traditions, Snorri spent time at the courts of King Hákon Hákonarson of Norway, and Earl Hákon the Mad in Sweden, which would have had their own narratives about a king as famous as Harald. Snorri explicitly states in the introduction to his work that he had to sort through a large corpus of material, and gives his own criteria for assessing the authenticity of the sources:

Some of this is to be found in the genealogies in which kings and other men of distinguished birth have traced their descent; but also some of it is written according to old poems or historical lays, which people have used to entertain themselves with. And although we do not know the truth of them, we do, however, know of examples when old and learned men have reckoned them to be true (Magnus and Palsson, 1966, p.23).

As Snorri states (Magnus and Palsson, 1966, p.25.), the core of his work is the 'old poems', the skaldic '*dróttkvætt*', of Scandinavian Court Poetry, which were composed by Harald and his poets, and whose complicated alliterative and syllabic patterns meant that they 'could be remembered and recited correctly even though the actual meaning had become obscure' (Magnus and Palsson, 1966, p.25). Magnus and Palsson note that Snorri was a lifelong student and practitioner of this 'esoteric',

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<sup>3</sup> Both *Heimskringla* and *Morkinskinna* recount a tale of how Snorri's ancestor spread tales of Harald's adventures. In *Morkinskinna*, for example, a young Icelander at Harald's court is given the challenge of telling tales throughout the Christmas season. When he is down to one tale left, with many days to go, he becomes downhearted: 'there is only one story left to me now, and I dare not tell it, for it is the story of your eastern adventures...It was my custom in Iceland to go each Summer to the Althing, and there I learnt each year some part of the story from Halldór Snorrason.' (Blöndal, 2008, p.211).



‘complex’ and ‘sophisticated art-form’ (1966, p.25), and of the *dróttkvætt* and the ‘historical kernel’ (1966, p.26) of *Heimskringla*, creating ‘the framework which he fleshed out with traditional accounts, both oral and written, and his own interpretations’ (1966, p.26). Snorri makes explicit his criteria for placing trust in these:

It is, of course, the way of Court Poets to lavish the most praise on the people for whom the poems were composed; but no one would dare to tell the king himself about deeds which everyone present, including the king, would know to be nonsense and lies; that would be mockery, not praise... (Magnus and Palsson, 1966, p.26)

But however conscientious Snorri was being with his written and oral sources, he was writing a hundred and fifty years after some of the events he is talking about, set in places he had never been to. Mistakes inevitably crept into his work. Blöndal gives two examples of places where Snorri misunderstood the interpretation of the poems (2007, p.56). These errors are most common in the period of Harald’s life when he was in exile (Finlay and Faulkes, 2016, p.x). Of the stories Snorri recounts of those Byzantine years, Finlay and Faulkes note:

The greater number of them are easily demonstrable folktales fathered at various times on to various generals, and are most unlikely to be even *au fond* truthful tales about him (2016, p.71).

Finlay and Faulkes also note that stories that are attributed to Harald are, in other sources, attributed to a number of other medieval figures using ‘almost identical words’ (2016, p.72). Even where the Mediterranean stories are believed by Blöndal to be based on fact, some of the stories were already twenty years old before the tellers made it back to Scandinavia. As he states, ‘the smart repartee and spectacular action contained in Harald’s Saga and *Heimskringla* alike are much-expanded self-justifications, originally told by Harald and blown up by his flatterers’ (Blöndal, 2007, p.66), indicating that fictionalisation of these tales was already occurring long before Harald and his retainers brought them back to Scandinavia.

It is clear that Snorri’s audience had their own concepts of authenticity, which we can assume were broadly similar to Snorri’s own. As Magnus and Palsson state (1966, p.33):

*Heimskringla* is not a work of history at all, in the modern sense of the term...the historical facts, so far as they were known, were used chiefly to portray the personalities and characters involved in them. The ‘success’ of a saga does not depend on its historical accuracy but rather on the skill with which its individual characters are

portrayed...[Snorri's aim was] to reveal aspects of Harald's character....Whether the stories are true or not.

The multiple layers of fictionalisation, which were clearly at work in the hundred plus years between the events and the time that Snorri was writing, mean that 'fascinating and convincing as he appears...[Harald] may have been a very different person in real life' (Magnus and Palsson, 1966, p.14). Snorri's fictionalisation of Harald presents us with a similar problem to that which the historical novel presents readers now. We know it is a braid of fact and fiction, but which strands are which, we cannot now tell.

Another problem is the focus of Snorri's work, which is heavily skewed towards Harald's later years, the years which Snorri probably had most evidence for. An analysis of *Heimskringla* shows how Harald's later life is given disproportionate attention. Chapter One covers the first fifteen years of Harald's life in a mere two hundred and forty-four words, while the last twenty years of his life are covered by fifty chapters. So while the saga material is an amalgamation of various source material, it is patchy, at best, in the years before Harald's return to Norway, in 1046.

I have said 'problem' above describing the void of information. This void, which Ann Rigney describes as the 'historical sublime' (2001, p.116), is one that the novelist is duty bound to fill in responsibly, with standards similar to those that Snorri himself set out, whereby the story should hold to the facts, where they exist, and that it should keep to the spirit of the truth where they were absent; and that it should form part of a compelling narrative.

Fletcher (2002, p.6) has described the essential duty of the historian thus:

Common sense is prone to assert that 'the facts speak for themselves'. Historians know that this is just what they don't do. Facts have to be coaxed and entreated into utterance. And if they are to speak, however hesitantly, however indistinctly, however obscurely, they have to be scrutinized against a background, a setting, in a context.

The aims of historian and novelist coincide; it is the manner of their coaxing which differs, a matter that I will return to later.

Harald Hardrada's life has been novelised a number of times, but he is poorly served by modern historical works. He is a peripheral figure in accounts of the Norman Conquest and is often referenced in books about the Vikings, but despite the achievements of his life, there are very few books that focus on him. I primarily used John Mardsen's biography of Harald, *Harald Hardrada: The Warrior's Way*, as a guide to

broadening the scope of my research, and also as a guide on the sources and their authenticity. His work builds on that of Blöndal and others in setting out a probable time-line, correcting Snorri's errors, and offering putative explanations and motivations that were valuable reference points. It also helped explore the parts of Harald's life that I was particularly interested in, the areas that Snorri had not covered, or those that, for absence of reliable material, he had filled in with apocryphal stories.

In this chapter I have set out the initial inspiration for writing about the Battle of Hastings, and then the sources that I used to locate the story and character of Harald Hardrada. In Chapter Two I will examine the critical-theoretical modellings of the historical novel, and propose an argument that links the historical novel to earlier historiographical narratives, a connection that is made explicit in the frame narrative of *Viking Fire* (p.11), where Archbishop Ealdred writes:

In a few cases, where it was impossible to know what had been thought or imagined at a certain time, I have followed the example of greater chroniclers, such as Herodotus, who furnished tales that seemed to fit.

The places I have invented, I hope these will do the work of history and that you will not find them too distracting.

## CHAPTER TWO

### History, Myth and the Beginnings of the Historical Novel

This chapter will provide the theoretical framework for this thesis, surveying the salient literary-critical modellings of the historical novel, romance and related writings. The range of differing literary-critical modellings that are visited in this exploration of historiography will necessarily complicate and compound the picture, but having assessed some of the most significant contributions made in this field, this chapter will go on to argue that rather than being a nineteenth-century innovation, the historical novel is an evolution of traditional historiographical narratives which can be traced back, before Defoe, to the wider tradition of historical narratives.

### Reframing History: Scott, Lukács, and White

The first important modelling of the historical novel is set out in *The Historical Novel* by Marxist critic, Georg Lukács. His model considers Sir Walter Scott's (1771-1832) historical novels as something revolutionary. Lukács links the rise of the genre to the new historical consciousness brought about by the French Revolution and the subsequent Napoleonic Wars (1962, p.23), which, he states, made history a mass European experience. His theory states that because of this mass experience people were imbued with a greater awareness and interest in history, and how the past linked to their present, an interest that Scott's work satisfied. (1962, p. 23).

Scott's success relied on a number of major artistic innovations, in Lukács's account. First, there is his invented 'middling...merely correct and never heroic' (Lukács, 1962, p.33) protagonists, who embodied the larger social movements of the time and provided a narrative portal into a semi-historical narrative and specific historical moment. Secondly, the historical realism he brought to his stories through the use of historical detail provided the readers with a heightened sense of a past moment. In combination, these features of Scott's work not only satisfied the craving for historical narratives but also succeeded in 'awaken[ing] distant, vanished ages' (Lukács, 1962, p.40) in a way that was new, and that, at the time, seemed revolutionary.

While Scott created the historical novel, in Lukács' model, the form would be developed, perfected and ultimately exhausted by other writers, reaching its apogee with the work of Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910). Tolstoy's work combined history and realism in a way that brings the lives of the protagonists to a level of 'richness and a liveliness scarcely

equalled before in world literature’ (1962, p.87). The demise of the genre comes with the last writer that Lukács is interested in, Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880), whose flight from the contemporary moment could be seen as a reaction against it. Lukács concludes that Flaubert was no longer interested in the ‘masses’ or the contemporary, but focused on the antiquarian and remote because of his own aversion to contemporary society.

Partly contemporary with Scott, historians such as Jules Michelet (1798-1874), Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886), and Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-59) were analysing historical sources in new, critical ways, with factual veracity being a key concern. These histories concerned themselves with what historian Hayden White describes as fact (not fable) in his seminal work, *Metahistory*. White’s work offers insights into the historical process and the types of works that result, showing the essential connection between the questions a historian asks of the source material and the type of history that results.

History, White observes, is a disordered chronology upon which a kind of order is placed by the form of a narrative arc. In short, ‘the historian confronts a veritable chaos of events already constituted, out of which he must choose the elements of the story he would tell’ (White, 2014, p.6). A historian’s role is “finding’, identifying’, or ‘uncovering’ the ‘stories’ that lie buried in the chronicles’ (2014, p.6), through a process of ‘exclusion, stress and subordination’, in order to explain “what was really happening” (White, 2014, p.x).

This process, according to White, involves categorising the types of questions a historian must ask, such as ‘What happened next?’, ‘How did that happen?’, ‘Why did things happen this way rather than that?’, ‘How did it all come about in the end?’ (White, 2014, p.7). The ways that a historian answers these questions allow histories to be categorised into ‘types’ of narrative, which White broadly breaks down thus:

**Table 1: Summary of White’s categorisation of broad types of historical narrative (2014, p.29)**

<b>Mode of Emplotment</b>	<b>Mode of Argument</b>	<b>Mode of Ideology</b>
<i>‘What happened?’</i>	<i>‘What is the point of this?’</i>	<i>Implication</i>
Romantic	Formist	Anarchist

Tragic	Mechanistic	Radical
Comic	Organist	Conservative
Satirical	Contextualist	Liberal

There are tensions here, of course, which undermine the assertions of historians, such as von Ranke, who declares that he is confirming *‘wie es eigentlich gewesen ist’* or ‘what really happened’ (1988, p.57). As Ann Rigney, literary critic and author of three scholarly books on the connections between identity, narrative and the past, notes, historical sources, once seen as fact, are instead to be seen as ‘opaque windows of frosted glass, which – like Carlyle’s ‘through a glass darkly’ – both reveal and conceal what is on the other side’ (2001, p.122). She borrows an image here from Thomas Carlyle’s essay, *On History (1830)*, which goes on to describe history as being ‘by its very nature...a labyrinth and chaos’ (Rigney, 2001, p.114). To assume, therefore, a mastery of the past is perhaps over-claiming on matters of authenticity. White acknowledges this point, stating that as history is practically infinite all histories are, as a result, a reduction and a simplification of what really happened, meaning that there is no way of knowing ‘what was really happening’ (2014, p.x). White allows that there are similarities between realistic novels and histories,<sup>4</sup> but believes that there are clear differences between ‘history’ and ‘fiction’ because the historian ‘finds’ his stories, whereas the fiction writer ‘invents’ (White, 2014, p.6).

## **Innovation and Evolution**

### **Romance, Status and Gender**

The work of Lukács and White has proved a fruitful foundation upon which other critics have based their modelling of the historical novel. Here we will examine the different ways that these foundations have been contested and developed. One of the major points of debate is whether Scott’s work was as revolutionary as Lukács states, or whether it was an evolution of other forms of writing.

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Like the realistic novel, a history is on one level an allegory. The degree of displacement of the informing (mythic) plot-structure may be greater in history than in poetry, **but the differences between a history and a fictional account of reality are matters of degree rather than of kind**’ (my bold, White, 1973, p.296).

Fiona Robertson is the author of three books on British and American writing between 1750 and 1850. In her modelling, the links between eighteenth-century romance and the older tradition of romance are made explicit, hinting that the historical novel may be an expression or a development of a longer tradition of historical narratives, of which the roots are in medieval poetic romances. These romances predominantly consisted of verse narratives that dealt with fantastical and nostalgic stories, such as the Middle English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. She highlights the similarities between Scott's work and that of Gothic writers, and in her modelling, rather than being seen as revolutionary, Scott should be seen more as part of the literary tradition of romance, rather than as something new and unique.

Ian Duncan, author of three books on eighteenth and nineteenth century novels, states that, before Scott, eighteenth century romance narratives were fictions particularly associated with dilemmas of love and honour and adorned with improbable exploits, written chiefly in vernacular prose (Duncan, 2005, p.10), largely by, and for the amusement of women. Critics such as Fielding considered these works 'pleasure without instruction' (Duncan, 2005, p.12), while near-contemporaneous views of romance, such as Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), reflect this masculine and value-laden point of view, defining romance as 'a military fable of the middle ages; a tale of wild adventure in 'war and love', but also 'a lie; a fiction', (Duncan, 2005, p.10). Even Scott's own 'Essay on Romance' described romance as 'a fictitious narrative in prose or verse; the interest of which turns upon marvellous and uncommon incidents' (Williams, 2010, p.1). Duncan argues that at the time that Scott was writing, the 18th century romance had become 'obsolete and inauthentic' (2005, p.11), partly because of its feminine connotations. Scott consciously adapted the tradition of romance, his form of historical realism banishing illusion and making the feminine romance 'masculine' (Duncan, 2005, p.13). This change made his prose of a higher status, acceptable to a wider readership. In doing this he also 'transformed the Gothic setting of an unreal and remote past, and showed that it was 'just over the horizon of living memory' (Walsh, 2014, para. 23), making history seem connected to the present moment. Similarly, Mark Salber Phillips believes that Scott's chief innovation was to transform romance from being 'a lie' or 'fiction apart' and to make the unreal and remote past seem familiar and also to make the novel conscious of history.

Like both Robertson and Duncan, Ina Ferris, author of three books that focus on the nineteenth-century novel, places emphasis on issues of gender and literary authority, and how that authority was constructed simultaneously ‘as the modern literary field was being constituted’ (1991, p.1). Her work provides insightful observations on Scott’s work as she traces how the novel evolved from being a low-status literary form to being ‘the resort and delight both of the undiscerning public and of their critical selves’ (Hayden, 1970, p.345).

The effects of Scott’s writing were considerable, the popularity of his work forcing a change upon both critics and writers. While von Ranke, as mentioned above (p.201), having read *Quentin Durward*, declared that he would avoid ‘all imagination and all invention and [...] restrict myself severely to the facts’ (Ferris, 1991, p.224), others, such as Frenchman Augustin Thierry (1795-1856) considered that *Ivanhoe*’s ‘smooth narrative line of standard history depended on erasure, its sense of unity and continuity on the repression of multiplicity and difference’ (Ferris, 1991, p.225), and would go on to write history as if it were romance, while, ultimately, Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859) would synthesise Scott’s innovations, stating:

an intimate knowledge of the domestic history of nations, is therefore absolutely necessary to the prognosis of political events. A narrative, defective in this respect, is as useless as a medical treatise, which should pass by all the symptoms attendant on the early stages of a disease, and mention only what occurs when the patient is beyond the reach of remedies (1853-61, p.367).

This has led Ferris to state that within the Waverley novels Macaulay ‘discovered a technique for making more efficient [history’s] disciplinary power’ (Ferris, 1991, p.236). According to Phillips, Scott shifted the focus of history away from grand events and characters, to middling heroes and a more democratic version of the novel, what William Hazlitt described as a ‘new edition of human nature’ (1825, 5th paragraph).

### **Questions of Authenticity**

Whether centred on Lukács’ revolutionary innovation, the masculinisation of romance, or the continuation of the romantic prose narratives, what all these theoretical modellings do point towards is a clear moment of change. It is then necessary to consider what brought about this moment of change, innovation, revolution or evolution.



Phillips provides valuable insights in his analysis of the wider changes throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and how these affected historical narratives throughout this period. In his model, the key movers of these changes were the interactions of a widening literate audience, an anonymous book market, and the subsequent interactions of writers and readers that changed what was perceived as authentic. In order to study this, he reframes White's schema of elite texts to include a much wider variety of eighteenth and nineteenth-century sources, including readers and writers of history, memoirs, biography, literary works and annals, and posits the concept of a 'historically specific ideal reader' (Phillips, 2000, p.11). Through this 'historically specific ideal reader' he traces how histories changed from the 'proper/dignified/literary' to include 'lesser' modes of writing such as biography and romance. Such fictional historical narratives remained of low status until Scott's work masculinised them, thereby giving them the necessary authenticity.

Phillips asserts that White's conclusions are based on too small a selection of 'elite' texts, which fail to take into account the wider developments in historiographical narratives, and writes (2000, p.10):

this book shifts the focus away from the individual text to a concern with the features that for eighteenth-century readers distinguished history as a genre – or, more precisely, a group of overlapping and related genres. Thus I would begin by recognising that history no more constituted a single, unified genre than the novel or the drama.... my real concern is the development of a broader system of genres in which all historiographical texts participated.

A good example of how varied a genre historical narratives could be is found in the work of Robert Mayer, who shows how in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, English historical discourses, in a similar way to the vernacular romances Scott criticised above, included the marvellous, personal memory, gossip, 'and a willingness to tolerate dubious material for practical purposes, all of which led to the allowance of fiction as a means of historical representation' (Mayer, 1997, p.4). The definition of history, then, had a wider applicability than it would go on to have. Mayer shows that 'History' meant contradictory things, such as 'narrative' as well as 'true account', and as a true account it could mean both 'essentially or morally true narrative' and 'factual accounts'. Central to this process of narrowing the definition of 'history' were the writings of eighteenth-century writer Daniel Defoe.

When Defoe published *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), he was drawing on the life of castaway Alexander Selkirk (Severin, 2002), in a way similar to the way historical novelists draw on the historical record. But *Robinson Crusoe* was presented and received by many as an autobiography not a novel, and did fit into then fluid categories, being both fictional and as good as fact. As the near-contemporary Masson asserted of Defoe's later works, *Memoirs of a Cavalier* (1720) and *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), that they 'are, for the purposes of historical instruction, as good as real' (Mayer, 1997, p.216). Or alternatively, the fact they were fiction did not stop them being true.

It was into these blurred definitions, where 'truth' and 'fiction' met, that Defoe's books settled, allowing him to plausibly claim that *Robinson Crusoe* and *A Journal of a Plague Year* were true histories, and for them to be accepted, initially at least, as such. But the tension here brought the question of factual veracity to the foreground. Defoe's work, by being both factual and fictional, brought into urgent being, and contention, the question of what was 'true history' (Mayer, 1997, p.9). In a social context where a historian's chief tasks were 'the discovery, criticism, and editing of what we would call primary materials' (Mayer, 1997, p.9), Defoe's narratives were not seen as being factually 'true'. Through the diverse responses to Defoe's work it is possible to track the moment that the word 'history' took on the meaning of factual veracity, a redefinition of the word that was revolutionary, and brought into question the factual veracity of histories that were written before this moment, and of novels which were written afterwards. This revolutionary redefinition led to a fracturing of historical narratives which we will return to later (p.210-14).

As White states, 'whole bodies of data from the past – everything contained in legend, myth, fable – were excluded as potential evidence for determining the truth about the past' (White, 2014, p.52). In the new Enlightenment, which was 'devoted to reason...not superstition, ignorance and tyranny' (White, 2014, p.52), histories now excluded much material that was fictionalised. Earlier histories that included 'fictional' material were now no longer considered legitimate. But it was precisely that fictional material - speeches, thoughts, motivations, private conversations, vivid and closely observed details – that made the bare facts of history more palatable. As Duncan observes, 'the powerful pleasures and important truths offered by fiction are precisely those of its unauthenticity' (2005, p.62).

The tension around the issue of authenticity was one that Scott felt keenly. Partly because of the debate that Defoe's work had prompted, invention within historical narratives was no longer considered legitimate. Thus Scott attempted to legitimise his novels by attributing his sources to lost manuscripts and oral histories, a process chronicled by Fiona Robertson (1994, pp. 119-20 & 129-60).

### **Paradoxes of Historical Fiction**

We have seen above how White defines the historian as someone who asks questions of the chronology, the answers to which, through a process of sublimation and omission, define the resulting history (p.200-1). White is clearly thinking of elite historians, but it is clear from Scott's criticism of Thomas Warton's *History of English Poetry* that he also had a method which was both planned and systematic.<sup>5</sup> Rigney gives us details of this process, which was to take the bare chronology of history, and through a process of sublimation, omission, depiction and invention to transform it into something both compelling and intelligible. While Scott's reduction of the material is different from that of a 'proper' historian, both follow a similar schema. To repeat, White states that historians 'find' their stories whereas the fiction writer 'invents' (White, 2004, p.6). However, in the case of historical novelists this is not strictly true. Paradoxically they both find *and* invent, and the resultant combination, the historical novel, is one that readers are willing to accept as a semi-historical text.

The ability to speak truth through artifice is something that characterises art in many of its expressions.<sup>6</sup> There are obvious overlaps in the ways that historians and historical novelists tell their stories. For example, each employs a narrative arc, and the terms that White uses to characterise the emplotment of histories, namely romance, satire, comedy and tragedy, are borrowed terms that originate with literature. But the essence of this debate is that the idea of 'truth' seems more vague than that of 'fact'.<sup>7</sup> A narrative can be both factually incorrect, i.e. not 'true to actuality', and yet 'true-to-meaning' (Rigney, 2001, p.26). This paradox has led to debates over factual accuracy

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<sup>5</sup> Scott considered Warton's approach 'exhibited a total neglect of plan or system' (Phillips, 2000, p.279).

<sup>6</sup> 'Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth' (Picasso, 1980, p.270).

<sup>7</sup> A 'fact' is 'A thing that is known or proved to be true'; while 'truth/true' is 'In accordance with fact or reality.' The emphasis on 'proved' is the key differentiation between a 'fact' and a 'truth'; for the early medieval period it also brings into question any written source, and hence the veracity of any history based upon these' (en.oxforddictionaries.com, 2017).

and legitimacy. In short, the ‘truthfulness’ of a historical narrative is one that has concerned historians and novelists since the inception of the historical novel, and it is an idea we shall return to. The historical novel presents challenges here: fact and fiction are interwoven in a coherent narrative, and while there is a clear fiction within them, there is a paradox which Mayer highlights: ‘the case of Defoe demonstrates that readers have given their assent to the claim that the novel is a fictional form that does the work of history’ (Mayer, 1997, p.16). Or, as we have seen, Defoe’s near contemporary, Masson, said that his fictional texts were ‘for the purposes of historical instruction, as good as real’ (Mayer, 1997, p.216).

Rigney’s response to this historiographical paradox mirrors that of White, namely, that our view of the past is ‘constructed by the questions we ask, the evidence we find, and the ways we devise to make sense of it and bring it alive’ (2001, p.100). Rigney claims that readers understood that Scott was not offering them a true account of the past, but one which claimed to represent the past. As an illustration of the unstable meanings of ‘truth’, she brings in Nancy Partner’s idea that there are representations which are ‘true-to-actuality’ and those that are ‘true-to-meaning’ (Rigney, 2001, p.24). The first base their authority on historical sources; the latter base it less on evidence and more on confidence in the understanding of the interpreter.

The success of a historical narrative depends on how well it is perceived by the audience as a coherent and accurate account of the past. Rigney considers the ideas of factuality and (im)perfection in historical narratives, and proposes that even ‘factual’ (primary source) accounts of historical events have an accompanying *hors-texte* made up of all the phenomena that escaped representation (Rigney, 2001, p.101) and are therefore imperfect representations of what von Ranke calls ‘what really happened.’ Historical narratives often focus on those areas where we cannot know what was said, or thought or discussed. Exactly because of this unknowability, Rigney claims that it is possible for historical works – outside the area of professional historians - such as novels, poems, or memoirs to have ‘a certain status as representations’ (Rigney, 2001, p.4). How, then, does this apply to the historical novel?

Contemporary historian and novelist Victoria Whitworth has spoken about her historical fiction being ‘archaeological’ rather than ‘historical’, drawing ‘on the archaeological record for its subject matter, but... also informed by an archaeological as much as an historical agenda’ (Whitworth, 2016). I propose a wider applicability of

her term, suggesting 'archaeological fiction' describes the fictional exploration into the dark spaces of Rigney's 'historical sublime' (Rigney, 2001, p.115). Through detailed research and consideration of events from the past, the author presents a possible narrative, and within that might stumble upon narrative 'truths' or insights into the past. In this way, historical fiction has value as a method of historical inquiry, as we shall see in Chapter Three (p.224 & p.224), and has 'the ability to do two things at once' (Rigney, 2001, p.5): to be both fictional and historical.

Masson's comment about Defoe's narratives, that they were 'as good as real' (Phillips, 2000, p.5) was a remark that would be made of the historical novel from Scott onwards. There is a clear paradox here, with fiction acting as, or conveying fact. As Hutcheon says, 'Texts cannot be both history and fiction, and yet novels are. ....the novel is built upon a dialogue of history and fiction, indeed the novel is such a dialogue' (Phillips, 2000, p.5). Scott 'continued the argument that the novel was a fictional form that could do the work of history' (Phillips, 2000, p.206). As Mayer notes, 'writers and readers of the novel have always treated novels as fictional texts with an unusual capacity to do things' (1997, p.237). Central to the debate throughout the period in question is the idea of truthfulness, factual veracity, or, as Rigney terms it 'authenticity' (2001, p.33). For Rigney, all historical narratives are imperfect in that they are incomplete glimpses into the past. While White considers novelists and historians' approaches to be broadly similar, Rigney offers a compelling explanation of how histories and historical novels have overlapped, and why readers accept fiction within a historical narrative.

According to Rigney's model, both histories and historical fictions are based on the same, incomplete, accounts of the past. They are therefore imperfect, in that they fail to give a true and complete account of events, and also fictive in the sense of being 'made and not found' (Rigney, 2001, p.6).

## Historical Sublime

So far the critical modellings considered have been primarily concerned with describing the rise of the historical novel. They have not been concerned with why we are so concerned with history, and why historiography remains such an area of debate and innovation. Returning to White and Rigney's views that the questions we ask of history define the answers we get, one can see that the questions that we ask of history are often defined by the gaps within the historical evidence. To turn the idea around: if there were complete evidence from the past we would not need to ask the questions; it is the gaps of knowledge that prompt our desire to interrogate, and the gaps help define the work that is produced. This desire is prompted by what Rigney postulates as the 'historical sublime': where the sublime effect is induced by the "aweful" engagement of the individual in contemplating the limits of our knowledge of the past' (2000, p.115). This observation is useful not only in assessing the authenticity of a text, but also because it goes further and offers an explication of what exactly it is about history, and historical novels, that readers and writers find so compelling. As Rigney herself describes it, 'There is so much of the past beyond the historical text that is still unknown, and [...] understanding the past as a whole is an almost unimaginably complex enterprise.'<sup>7</sup> It is the dark spaces within history that draw our imaginations. How the darkness is illuminated differentiates the work that is produced, or in other words, it is how the historian and the novelist respond to the historical sublime that defines the work produced as history or fiction, or a mix of the two (Rigney, 2000, p.114). Historical novelists begin their work with similar motivations, starting positions and material to historians. That they then go on to produce works that function, for readers, in such similar and paradoxical ways is perhaps to be expected.<sup>8</sup> But the question of authenticity and legitimacy is not a problem particular to historical novelists.

Historical narratives are, in a sense, as old as literature itself,<sup>9</sup> and although there is much that differs in the genre and type that they take, the pre-eighteenth century

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<sup>8</sup> 'The historian, like the novelist...both selects material for exposition and determines which scenes and incidents will receive detailed treatment' (Lateiner, 1989, p.120).

<sup>9</sup> The Western literary tradition has been based on the Greek *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, generally believed to have been written down in the late 8th or early 7th centuries BCE (Croally & Hyde, 2011, p.26). The Chinese literary canon is also based on historical narratives such as the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, a Chronicle of the State of Lu (722 to 481 BC), probably written down in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE (Wilkinson, 2012, p.612).

narratives, such as *Heimskringla* or *Beowulf*, for example, mix fact and fiction together in varying degrees that were acceptable to their audiences. And yet, authors and audiences were still concerned with those questions of ‘authenticity’ and legitimacy’, definitions of which continue to shift through time, as we shall see in Chapter Three.

## **History Narratives: Creation, Separation & Reunion of a Tradition**

### **Creation**

In writing this thesis, I have considered the emergence and continued popularity of the historical novel. As stated in the Introduction, it is the thesis of this critical commentary that the historical novel’s development is intricately linked to the wider tradition of historical narratives. In saying this I am not implying a coherent tradition of historical narratives, but rather a looser set of narratives with a similar mix of fact and fiction which typifies pre-eighteenth-century historical narratives.

To start, it is worth exploring the etymological roots of our modern word ‘history’, beyond the eighteenth century. The word comes from the Greek ‘ἱστορία’, which ‘has its prime meaning “a story,” without the modern implication that it should be a true story (Barber, 1986, p.17). In these terms, and for much of history, histories were stories which dealt per se with the past. As a narrative discipline, historical discourse, as such, may be seen as starting with Herodotus (c. 484–c. 425 BC), named ‘the Father of History’ by Cicero (Luce, 1997, p.26). Herodotus’ *Histories* were ‘a combination of observation, analysis, inquiry, and μῦθοι both myths (stories as we understand them) and facts’ (Hughes, 2011). His method of sorting through accounts ‘both numerous [i.e., contradictory] and laughable’ and selecting what seemed to him ‘to be true’ (Lateiner, 1989, p.9.), and then conveying these facts in a mimetic way<sup>1</sup> established in the written form a new standard of historical narrative that was more successful than subsequent Ancient Greek historians who either stuck rigidly to the facts, such as Thucydides,<sup>2</sup> or

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<sup>1</sup> ‘The many speeches...do not claim to reproduce faithfully what the speaker said, if indeed he delivered a speech at all...They are intended to reveal character, to explain the grounds of a policy, or to elucidate strategic considerations...’ (Hignett, 1963, p.34).

<sup>2</sup> Part of Herodotus’ success as a historian is precisely this ability to invent, as Lateiner notes: ‘Speeches in oratio obliqua are, as a rule, more likely to represent accurately the gist of actual words and discussions...By

those, like Phantias of Eresos and Idomeneus of Lampsakos whose works were ‘untroubled by any respect for the truth...[padded out] with tasteless episodes of their own invention’ (Hignett, 1963, p.20).

While there are some limitations to his writing (Hignett, 1963, p.3), he is explicit in describing his own historical method,<sup>3</sup> which relied on a mix of evidence and, where evidence was lacking, his own invention. Although he sometimes includes stories of dubious credibility he deftly handles the question of legitimacy and authenticity.<sup>4</sup> A concern echoed by Snorri in Chapter One (pp.195-7), and anonymous authors of historical ‘fictions’, such as poetic epics like *Beowulf*, where the narrator is often keen to establish some kind of legitimacy, basing his tale either on stories he has heard or on others whose judgment is viewed as reliable.<sup>5</sup>

While there were variations in these approaches, the similarity of their methods and standards across time and space suggests that some balance of factual truth and mimetic excitement may be typical of pre-modern narratives that were accepted by their audiences as being ‘true’.<sup>6</sup>

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comparison, Thucydides’ speeches are less like real talk, less believable as words actually spoken, and therefore from the point of view of historical credibility, less successful’ (1989. p.21).

<sup>3</sup> ‘Where Herodotus cannot transmit verifiable facts or adequate recollections but requires some account of how events came to pass, the reader is offered explanatory incidents...insulated from the author’s endorsement of every detail by their elaborated dramatic nature (conveyed by direct speech, gestures, paralinguistic noises etc.)’ (Lateimer, 1989, p.25).

<sup>4</sup> Herodotus employed various ways of presenting his stories, with seventy-seven uses of ‘Ἄεγεται’ – ‘it is said’ to show that ‘[Herodotus] does not vouch for what followed’ (Lateiner, 1989. p.22).

<sup>5</sup> The opening line of the poem is framed by ‘Wé... gefrúnon’ (‘We have heard...), which establishes the story’s communal credentials; while ‘hýrde ic’ – ‘I have heard/or equivalents’ – establishing the especial authority of the tale-teller - is repeated twenty times, and ‘ic máran geseah’ ‘I have seen’ is repeated twice.

<sup>6</sup> ‘In the past, *Heimskringla* has been accepted, uncritically, as the gospel of Scandinavian history, as unassailable as Holy Writ’ (Magnus and Palsson, 1966, p.14). Also, ‘the *Kalevala* has long fuelled the emergence of the Fins as an individual nation...For national identity, epic is a foundational genre’ (Fowler, 2004, p.184-5).



## Separation & Reunion

As we have seen above (p.210), eighteenth-century debates over the meaning of 'truthfulness' led to the divorce of what, in Herodotean terms, were two types of 'μῦθοι' ('stories' as we understand them, and 'facts'), as 'history' begins to invest in a similar kind of 'empirical method' as contemporary natural philosophy. This moment, which is described above as a 'fracturing' of the tradition, led to histories that were perceived as factually accurate, and to other texts that were regarded as inauthentic. But these high-status factual histories clearly lacked the mimetic value of earlier works leading to a vacuum, in essence, in the expectations of Phillips' 'historically specific ideal reader'. Ferris, for example, quotes Thomas Macaulay expressing dissatisfaction with the 'conventional 'dignity'' of historical discourses in his time, and their failure to take into account 'ordinary life as a historical force' (Ferris, 1991, p.234). 'Official', 'dignified', 'elite' and 'authentic' histories 'lost ground' as lower-status forms of narrative, such as biography and memoirs 'beneath the dignity of men who describe the revolutions of nations' (Macaulay, 1853-61, p.362), became more popular.

We have seen above (pp.205-6) how Defoe's works were 'issued as history,' then later were 'branded as lies, and eventually read as novels' (Mayer, 1997, p.4). Traditional historical texts underwent a similar process, being viewed as history before the eighteenth century, dismissed as inauthentic during it, and then read as entertaining but not factual accounts afterwards. Popular accounts were discredited as inauthentic, but rather than consuming the elite and authentic texts, the audience turned to texts which included 'general, philosophical, and conjectural histories, but also annals, memoirs, biography, and literary history' (Phillips, 2000, p.xi). Considering works such as Defoe's, which blend fact and fiction, readers gave 'their assent to...a fictional form that does the work of history' (Mayer, 1997, p.16). Scott's historical novels then can be seen as a reinvention of that older tradition, now defined not as a history or true account, but that hybrid form, the historical novel.

Scott's success reinforces the idea that that the broadly similar characteristics of historical narratives that we have seen above were what reading audiences were most willing to consume. A further proof of the willingness of

audiences to consume this meld of fact and fiction is the fact that “the sudden redistribution” within and among discursive fields’ (Mayer, 1997, p.4) did not end in the eighteenth century with Defoe, or with Scott in the nineteenth century. It continued throughout the nineteenth century, as the mimetic impact of Scott’s writing changed what was counted as history, with historians using fictional techniques to give their narratives the ‘eye-witness effect’, the sense that ‘You felt as though you were actually there’ (Ferris, 1991, p.13). It could be argued, therefore, that Scott’s work brought about a restoration of the situation that was in place at the beginning of the eighteenth century, when Defoe was writing, with the caveat that the fact that now Scott’s blend of factual and fictional was made more explicit through the labelling of the work not as history, but as history-fiction (Mayer, 1997, p 219). This is a process that is still continuing. Mayer notes how ‘in the United States, at least, academic historians regularly assign novels in their classes to ‘teach’ students about such subjects as nineteenth-century Russian revolutionary movements, France etc.’ (1997, p.237), while Dutton (2010, p.114-5) neatly sums up the contradictions that historical fictions present in terms of conveying fact through fiction:

I fancy I possess a fair understanding of life and society in nineteenth-century Russia...But...I am not sure if I have ever read a history of czarist Russia. Like many of my contemporaries, I have built up this body of information through reading Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Gogol, Pushkin, Lermontov and Turgenev.

There are also contemporary examples of historians turning to the fictional yet mimetic style of writing. Curator of the British Museums’ *Vikings: Life and Legend* exhibition, Thomas William’s *Viking Britain* (2017) uses fictional passages within his history, for example, and *New York Post* 2014 Book of the Year, *The Age of the Vikings*, by Yale University’s Forst Family Professor of History, Anders Winroth, starts with a fictional reconstruction of a Viking feast in a hall:

Finally the chief took his high seat. The warrior band had waited eagerly on the benches around the great hall, warmed by the crackling fire, quaffing bounteous mead’ (Winroth, 2014, p.1).

The caveat that Winroth adds to the end of that chapter<sup>7</sup> could just as effectively be applied to a serious historical novel. Historical narratives from both sides of the fictional divide are skirting fine and still-shifting distinctions. As the Booker Prize-winning author, Hilary Mantel has said in an interview with Diarmaid MacCulloch, Oxford Professor of the History of the Church, '[Historical novelists should] not spend your life [thinking] you are some inferior form of historian. The trades are different but complementary' (Armitstead, 2016).

In this chapter I have addressed the major critical-theoretical modellings for the historical novel, and highlighted the ideas that proved most informative to me as a writer and which aided me in the process of responding to the historical sublime. In particular, this chapter has also argued that the historical novel is the latest incarnation of a longer tradition of historical narratives that combine fact and mimetic fictions to tell a greater truth. In Chapter Three I shall use a limited, but representative selection of historical novels written across the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries, in order to trace some salient features in how the genre itself has developed from Scott to the present day, provide examples of how writers have struggled with issues of authenticity, and to examine how this selection of novelists represented the research that informed their novels.

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<sup>7</sup> 'In the *Age of the Vikings*, I draw on an array of contemporary written, visual, and material sources, as well as abundant scholarship in history, archaeology, literature, and neighbouring disciplines, in order to recapture from a broad contextual perspective something of the excitement and innovation of that difficult period...' (Winroth, 2014, p.12)

## CHAPTER THREE

### Evolutionary Moments of the Historical Novel, from Scott to Mantel

This chapter will be a selective analytical engagement with five historical novels ranging from Sir Walter Scott to Hilary Mantel, with special reference to novelists that I particularly admire (Renault and Mantel), who have been influential in their fields (Scott and Morris) or who are writing about a similar time period (Bulwer-Lytton). My discussion of these novels will provide case studies for a limited account of the literary history of the historical novel discussed in Chapter Two and will chart some of the broad changes and characteristics of the genre from its origins with Scott, through the nineteenth century, as exemplified by Edward Bulwer-Lytton and William Morris, and then into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as epitomised by Mary Renault and Hilary Mantel. This chapter will also examine how each of the five authors selected authors have navigated the boundaries of fact and invention, and how they have represented the research behind their novel in order to give it a sense of historical verisimilitude. This approach will allow a selective chronicle of how historical fiction has reacted to altering expectations of readers, developments in historical source material, and literary tastes.

#### Walter Scott, *Quentin Durward* (1823)

*Quentin Durward* was Scott's fourteenth novel, published nine years after his first novel, *Waverley*. It is a novel with two strands, typical of Scott's *modus operandi*, outlined in Chapter Two above, (p.199). The historical strand based on Commines' diaries, includes historical characters such as Commines, Louis XI and Charles the Bold. It stays close to historical facts, at times even quoting directly from Commines' work, while Scott also using 'such phrases as "Commines assures us"' (French, 1967, p.168) within the novel. While this thread aims for historical accuracy, the *hors-texte*, which follows Quentin Durward, who is a good example of what Lukács described as the 'middling' hero, or Rigney's 'everyman'. Durward's plotline is clearly romance, starting on a 'delicious summer morning' (Scott, 1823, p.12) with Durward's nationality and native goodness resulting in his being taken on by Louis XI. The king later entrusts Durward with escorting the young and beautiful Countess Isabelle through France. As Durward escorts his charge through France, their love grows, and while there are many impediments to their union, the final romantic

flourish of the novel occurs when Durward's gentility is affirmed by Lord Crawford, allowing Isabelle and Durward to marry, with the last sentence stating: 'sense, firmness, and gallantry... have put [Durward] in possession of WEALTH, RANK, and BEAUTY', (Scott, 1832, p.484), summing up in a single sentence one of the principal themes in Scott's writings, that gallantry and decency will be suitably rewarded, in what Lukács described as 'a defence of progress' (1962, p.63).

Even though Scott admits to 'changing history for dramatic purposes' and states that this 'conflicted with his conscience as an historian' (French, 1967, p.165), when forced to choose between romance and fact, Scott is inclined towards romance in order to bring 'his story into a pleasing, compact, and sufficiently intelligible form' through the 'liberal use of the power of departing from the reality of history' (Scott, 1832, p.viii). Responding to criticisms in the 1830 introduction Scott defended the improbability of his tale with phrases such as 'it might be reasonably pleaded.... There is therefore no violent improbability...nor is it a great stretch of probability' (1853, p.ix). The strenuous nature of Scott's defence of his novel here implies the historical stretch that he was expecting his readers to make. As we have seen in Chapter Two, the inaccuracies within *Quentin Durward* so offended historian von Ranke that he declared that his work would show 'only...what happened' (Docker and Curthoys, 2010, p.56). But these errors and historical elisions were severely criticised in a contemporary review:

the author of an historical novel may omit facts, or add to them inventions which are in keeping with what is known. But he is not at liberty to distort the truth ...under the guise of amusement...[rendering] in a great degree nugatory, one of the most laborious and useful of human studies (Hayden, 2003, p 278).

Although the success of *Quentin Durward* clearly suggests that Scott's blend of authentic and inauthentic was acceptable to readers of his time, this judgement quickly changed. If, as Rigney says above (p.208), the historical novel has 'a certain status as representations', then Scott's type of historical novel would soon be considered historically illegitimate, stylistically childish and historically unrepresentative, as we shall see below with Bulwer-Lytton. Critical to this process were the writings of Henry James, who expressed his standards in this manner:

We care only for what is--we know nothing about what ought to be--human life is interesting because we are in it and of it...all sorts of curious things are taking place...the real is the most satisfactory thing in the world (James, 1972, p.305).

Although James admitted Scott's work was a juvenile pleasure, he viewed it as being neither authentic nor realist enough.<sup>10</sup>

In the examples of historical novels that follow, we shall see how later writers dealt with the historical novel's tension between realism and romance, and how writers tried to make their fictional tales authentic to the readers, to become authentic representations of the past, and how standards of authenticity have changed.

## **Lytton and Morris: Victorian Reactions Against the Industrial World**

### **Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *Harold, the Last of the Saxons* (1848)**

Bulwer-Lytton's own work clearly resonated with the readers of his era, with sales of his books in the years up to 1914 'rivalling those of Dickens' (Mitchell, 2003, p.i). While he was intimately familiar with and inspired by Scott's novels which he praised for arousing 'a misty veneration for the antique' (Dahl, 1958, p.60), he considered them 'deficient in the 'highest attributes of art – philosophy and ethics'' (Dahl, 1958, p.60). If, as Fielding stated, that romance was 'pleasure without instruction' (Duncan, 2005, p.12), then Bulwer-Lytton wanted to provide *both* pleasure and instruction, and to show more respect to the historical sources. Bulwer-Lytton aimed instead for a new kind of historical novel,<sup>11</sup> more truthful to the past, which would not invent, but would extract the 'natural romance from the actual history' (Bulwer-Lytton, 1853, p.ix), and thereby 'produce the greatest dramatic effect at the least expense of historical truth' (Bulwer-Lytton, 1853, p.viii).

What principally defines and differentiates Bulwer-Lytton's approach is the air of authority he brings to his writing. There is none of Scott's apologetic defence of his work, as above (p.216). Bulwer-Lytton presents his credentials in social, historical and masculine terms, dedicating the novel to a pillar of society, the Right Honourable C.T. d'Eyncourt<sup>12</sup> whose 'hospitable roof and library, provided the 'authorities I most needed.' (1853, p.vi). The 'authorities' in question are what Duncan classifies as the 'elite' texts, the 'real records of the time', to which he remains 'faithful' (1853, p.iii), constructing plots 'from the actual events themselves.' For Bulwer-Lytton the written sources are sacrosanct, stating that their

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<sup>10</sup> 'he is identical with the ideal fireside chronicler...to enjoy him, we must again become as credulous as children at twilight' (James, 1864, p.431).

<sup>11</sup> 'The mode I have adopted...has perhaps only this merit, that it is my own, - mine by discovery and mine by labour' (Dahl, 1958, p.60).

<sup>12</sup> MP for Stamford (1831-1832), for Lambeth (1832-1852), also uncle of Alfred Lord Tennyson.

lacunae is the legitimate realm for fiction, which is ‘confined chiefly to the private life, with its domain of incident and passion’ (1853, p.iv). He used ‘fictional characters or imaginary events only in the interest of enlivening or explaining authentic history’ (Dahl, 1958, p.60-1).

Despite Bulwer-Lytton’s declaration of truth, however, like Scott, he is clearly influenced by romance, albeit in a form updated to reflect the romantic notions of his time. Lytton starts with an evocation of a pre-industrial rural idyll, replete with ‘boys’, ‘lasses’, meadows, woodland, hedge-rows, ‘patient oxen’, and maypoles (Bulwer-Lytton, 1853, p.1). Having summoned up his semi-fictional romantic landscape, the scope of Lytton’s novel is clearly larger than that of Scott: his novel is as much about the country of England as it is about the characters involved or the brief historical moment, and, as we shall see, it is as much about his current time as it is about the historical period it portrays.

Bulwer-Lytton bolsters the authenticity of his work by adding a level of realism, principally by varying his language to include words of archaic derivation, such as in this short extract:

‘Fulke the Norman had these fair fields, yon orchards and tynen; Fulke sold them to Clapa, the Earl’s sixhaendman, and what in mancusses and pence Clapa lacked of the price, we, the ceorls of the Earl, made up from our own earnings in the Earl’s noble service. And this very day, in token thereof, have we quaffed the bedden-ale\*’

But despite Lytton’s use of antiquated vocabulary, his novel shows little understanding of deeper cultural and psychological differences between his time and those he was attempting to describe in his fiction. As Christensen notes, ‘his Romans, mediaeval Italians, and mediaeval Englishmen are almost indistinguishable from each other’ (2004, p.134), and this simplistic understanding of the past is evident in the way Bulwer-Lytton depicts King Edward and Duke William. Their characters are subservient to stereotypical predominating national characters and customs of Saxon and Norman, the contribution of which will be a central theme of the novel. The way that Bulwer-Lytton responds to Rigney’s historical sublime says more about the preoccupations of his own day than it does about the historical period. Bulwer-Lytton used the historical novel to comment ‘on the political and social problems of his own day through his analysis of history’ (Dahl, 1958, p.61). But by using the historical facts as a template within which he can articulate his own political sentiments, Bulwer-Lytton distorts history,<sup>13</sup> often simplifying or

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<sup>13</sup> ‘He wanted to keep his characters warmly individual, and yet through them he wanted to represent abstract moral and political forces’ (Dahl, 1958, p.67).

reducing the realism of his characters to make them symbolic of their national characteristics (Christensen, 2004, p.133). And the idea that written sources were ‘real records’ capable of delivering a ‘fair and true’ account was already being discredited by Bulwer-Lytton’s contemporary Carlyle, who, as we saw above in Chapter Two (p.201), understood that sources can obscure and distort as much as they can illuminate.

Bulwer-Lytton’s contemporary, the historian Thomas Babington Macaulay, considered Bulwer-Lytton to be ‘fond of writing about what he only half understands, or understands not at all’ (Mitchell, 2003, p.98), while Carlyle was more severe, stating that Bulwer-Lytton was ‘a quack’ and that his novels were ‘a piece of pinchbeck’ (Mitchell, 2003, p.105). And while Bulwer-Lytton’s fiction was very successful in his time, the popularity of his work did not last. Broad generalisations of race and gender dated his work, and by modern standards these draw the narrative away from the individual towards the ‘race’, serving to diminish the potential of his fiction, as do the political, historical propositions that he has embedded within.

While Bulwer-Lytton’s own work has almost disappeared with the preoccupations that it was addressing, his model of the historical novel, which uses the past to talk to the present, and which has roots in Thucydides, has remained popular, pointing to broad similarities between the historical novel and earlier historical narratives, as suggested in Chapter Two (p.210-14).

Although Bulwer-Lytton’s work is no longer widely read, the work of the next novelist, William Morris has, in comparison, had lasting power. While it shares many of the same concerns and romantic ideals as Bulwer-Lytton’s, Morris’ work will produce a very different kind of historical fiction, one which has perhaps had much wider and long-lasting effects on British literature than Bulwer-Lytton’s, and which, has retained a degree of popularity.

**William Morris, *The House of the Wolfings. A Tale of The House of the Wolfings and all the Kindreds of the Mark written in Prose and in Verse* (1889)**

William Morris (1834–1896) was an English textile designer, poet, translator, and socialist activist, whose work spanned a wide range from design, translation, poetry and



fiction, and whose work has remained defining in many fields.<sup>14</sup> Morris was an avid reader of Sir Walter Scott (MacCarthy, 1994, pp.5–6) and developed a special interest in Norse mythology. As T.A. Shippey has suggested, both Morris and Scott ‘felt the perilous charms of the archaic world of the North, recovered from bits and scraps by generations of inquiry’ (2005, p.70). It was these scraps of inquiry – part textual and part linguistic – that made ‘the North’ an exciting area of research, providing new insights into the past, and with each new insight came new sublimines, with their ‘uncomfortable form[s] of pleasure’ (Rigney, 2001, p.115), or inspiration.

*The House of the Wolfings* is subtitled a ‘prose-romance’ and has been described both as a historical (Boenig, 2007) and as a fantasy (Sprague de Camp, 1976, p.40) novel, even though little magical happens. Like Bulwer-Lytton’s novel, *Harold*, it shares many of the romantic ideas typical of the Victorian period: it is set in a rural idyll, this one a Germanic tribal society at the moment that it comes under attack from the civilised Romans, and is tinged by a romanticisation of the Germanic over the more ‘civilised’ peoples associated with the Romance languages. However, while Scott used fictional everymen in his stories, and Bulwer-Lytton dramatized the traditional narrative of a British national destiny, one of the main appeals of Morris’ work was his radical defamiliarizing of a traditional narrative, turning ‘the classical view upside down, so that his forest-dwelling Goths uphold civilised values while imperial Rome represents barbarism’ (Garth, 2005, p.219).

While Scott and Bulwer-Lytton rely primarily on written sources for factual points of information, their research appears to be limited largely to them; and so their claim to historical verisimilitude is based almost entirely on their fidelity to those written sources. In contrast, Morris makes no claims for factual veracity for his work and dismisses ‘research’<sup>15</sup>, though this is perhaps because he disliked the kind of ‘research’ that his near-contemporaries, such as Bulwer-Lytton, engaged in. His was not a short period of time spent in a library scrabbling for facts, but was based upon a lifelong interest and expertise in ‘Northernness’, originally inspired by Benjamin Thorpe’s *Northern Mythology* (1851), read when Morris was still a student at Oxford University. Morris had visited Iceland and had also translated a number of sagas, including *Grettli’s* and *Volsung Sagas*, the Old English

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<sup>14</sup> ‘It is not much of an exaggeration to look upon Morris as a founder of the modern art movement in England, and that claim...is true in many ways of his fiction as well’ (Mathews, 1978, p.5).

<sup>15</sup> When asked by a European scholar where he had found his sources for *The Mark in the House of the Wolfings*, William Morris famously reacted with scorn, saying, ‘it’s a romance, a work of fiction—that it’s all lies! Hasn’t the pedantic ass ever heard of creative imagination, or known an artist of any kind?’ (Sparling, 1924, p.50).

*Beowulf*, as well as the *Aeneid* and *Odyssey*. This grounding in authentic source material imbued his fiction with a level of authenticity without making any specific or overt claims of such. Morris seems tacitly to adopt Snorri's pre-historical approach, aspiring not for factual veracity but for the 'plausible' (Magnus and Palsson, 1966, p.23) nature of his tale.

One particularly distinctive feature of Morris' work is his use of language, and the majority of my subsequent comments on Morris's text will be concerned with this aspect of it. He 'chose his language to create new worlds, not merely to imitate the old' (Mathews, 1978, p.61). His preference and his knowledge of linguistics enable him to select words of Old English derivation over those from Latin or French. The effect this conveys conjures up a world that feels psychologically closer to the time it is depicting than Scott or Lytton's language, a style that is 'genuinely radical... in the sense that... forces us back to our linguistic roots and origins.' (Mathews, 1978, p.27), as well as perhaps conveying an older world to the reader:<sup>17</sup>

The tale tells that in times long past there was a dwelling of men beside a great wood. Before it lay a plain, not very great, but which was, as it were, an isle in the sea of woodland, since even when you stood on the flat ground, you could see trees everywhere in the offing, though as for hills, you could scarce say that there were any; only swellings-up of the earth here and there, like the upheavings of the water that one sees at whiles going on amidst the eddies of a swift but deep stream (Morris, 2003, p.15).

One distinctive feature of Morris' writing is the mixture of prose and poetry. For example, in the excerpt below, characters talk to each other in 'rhyme and measure' rather than common conversation:

The man was young, lithe and slender, and had no raiment but linen breeches round his middle, and skin shoes on his feet. As he stood there gathering his breath for speech, Thiodolf stood up, and poured mead into a drinking horn and held it out towards the new-comer, and spake, but in rhyme and measure:

“Welcome, thou evening-farer, and holy be thine head,  
Since thou hast sought unto us in the heart of the Wolfings' stead;  
Drink now of the horn of the mighty, and call a health if thou wilt  
O'er the eddies of the mead-horn to the washing out of guilt.

For thou com'st to the peace of the Wolfings, and our very guest thou art,  
And meseems as I behold thee, that I look on a child of the Hart.”

But the man put the horn from him with a hasty hand, and none said another word to him until he had gotten his breath again; and then he said:

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<sup>17</sup> '[Tolkien] thought that people could feel history in words, could recognize language styles, could extract sense from sound alone...' (Shippey, 2005, p.130).

“All hail ye Wood-Wolfs’ children! nought may I drink the wine (Morris, 1892, p.24)  
(My underlining).

This pioneering ‘verse-and-prose’ style specifically copies Snorri’s style of saga-writing (Garth, 2005, p.26), and mimics the broader palimpsest nature of genuine historical documents,<sup>16</sup> which, like *Heimskringla*, often have verse incorporated into the prose. The excerpt above also demonstrates how selective Morris was with his choice of vocabulary. From the above selection, only three words, ‘raiment’, ‘measure’ and ‘peace’ are of non-Germanic etymology, while ‘wine’ is an early borrowing from Latin giving the Proto-Germanic \*winam (Online Etymological Dictionary, 2001-18).

In terms of realism, Morris is also charting new ground. His work does not aspire towards Henry James’s standards, but is effectively creating his own criteria of verisimilitude, which mimics medieval documents (Drout, 2013, 50.23). Another way of thinking about this matter is to say that by copying the stylistic features of medieval literature, Morris is, in a sense, bringing the historical novel full circle, back to its stylistic roots in the medieval romances that would go on to inspire earlier romantic novels.

Morris’ writing also marks an important point of divergence both from Scott and Bulwer-Lytton’s work. Morris rejects developing ideas of realism, and draws instead on historical examples, such as medieval romance and sagas, for the style of his novel. He makes no claims for realism or authenticity, and his novel serves in many ways as a romance, returning perhaps, to the romance source material that pre-dated Scott, and reforming it in novelistic form, as argued in Chapter Two (p.202). It also marks an important literary node, and a wider kind of divergence within the historical novel as Morris’ work brought the historical novel back toward the fantastical, and would go on to be a major influence and inspiration for the writing of J.R.R. Tolkien, which in turn has established the modern fantasy and historical fantasy genre, which has sometimes been seen as a sub-genre of the historical novel.

Fifty-odd years separate *The House of the Wolfings* from *Quentin Durward* and a similar length of time separates Morris’ work from that of the next author we shall consider, Mary Renault.

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<sup>16</sup> ‘Rather than characters bursting into poetry being an embarrassing flaw, it’s a powerful mimetic feature. It’s not mimetic of real life, but mimetic of the textual traditions of the Middle Ages... that have been contributed to by many minds and hands.’ (Drout, 2013, 48.42).

## **Renault and Mantel: Realism and the Modern Historical Novel**

As literary tastes and fashions changed, so too did the historical novel. While some of the changes are partly explained by author's and audience's increasing access to information, they also derive from different expectations and desires on behalf of both writer and reader. With the next two authors whose work I will discuss, there is much more awareness of the historical texts' imperfections, sparsity, and ambiguities, which Carlyle highlighted in the nineteenth century (p.201). But also what counts as history has changed, as historian Robin Fleming notes: 'discoveries unearthed by archaeologists in the past thirty years are profoundly transformative, not least because they are so often at odds with our texts' (2010, p.xxi).

Modern historiography is based on a much wider range of disciplines, such as archaeology, linguistics and psychology, than the nineteenth-century histories. They are also written for an audience that has access to more of the source material, and so expect a more convincing standard of realism, or historical verisimilitude. So, while, Scott's criteria for 'degrees of probability' had not changed significantly, the way that readers and writers saw these had, and there is a reflective change in the work that is produced by the next author whose work I shall consider, Mary Renault.

### **Mary Renault, *The King Must Die* (1958)**

*The King Must Die* is the first of two books, the second being *The Bull from the Sea* (1962), that deal with the Theseus legend and rework it as a realistic novel. Renault's own life serves as an example of many of the societal and literary changes that had transformed the literary marketplace between Morris and Renault. She attended a girls' boarding school, studied English at Oxford (an institution which had been the preserve of men until 1920), served as a nurse from 1933-45, and as an openly gay<sup>18</sup> female writer, published a series of novels that dealt with contemporary homosexuality. Added to this were academic advances, such as the invention of disciplines such as psychology, radical new understanding of contemporary oral storytelling by men like Milman Parry, linguistic revelations, such as the deciphering of the Linear B by Michael Ventris in the 1950s, and archaeological discoveries, such as those at Mycenae, Troy and Knossos, that showed that

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<sup>18</sup> Her depiction of fluid sexuality 'very subtly portrayed within the stories...and I think that has really helped me in my understanding of the past because this is what it was like' Bettany Hughes (*MRLWAG*, 2006, 20.48).

pre-Classical texts, such as the *Iliad*, were not fictions, but were mimetic blends of fiction and probable fact, often rooted in historical moments. These discoveries were doing two important things, amongst others: they were changing the way Classical stories were regarded, but also, in the same way as nineteenth-century philologists had gained new insights into pre-history through Germanic etymology, these advances in the understanding of the Classical world highlighted the imperfections of what Bulwer-Lytton called ‘authentic texts’, and offered a refreshed sense of the historical sublime.

Renault also happened to be writing at a moment when Classics was undergoing what Tom Holland has described as ‘precipitous decline’ (*Mary Renault: Love and War in Ancient Greece*, hereafter *MRLWAG* 2006, 3.38), meaning that the ‘historically specific ideal reader’ Phillips postulated in Chapter Two (p.204) had a desire for stories that was not being fulfilled, as it had before, by education. By blending fact and fiction in a mimetic fashion she ‘moved in to fill the gap...her novels were letting [those who had not studied classics formally] the chance to read about it...’ (*MRLWAG*, 2006, 3.38).

Some of these changes between the nineteenth-century authors and Renault are revealed in her bibliography to her biography of Alexander the Great, *The Nature of Alexander*, where Renault groups the range of source material<sup>19</sup> she has used, going ‘beyond written sources and employ[ing] anthropology, archaeology, cultural artefacts, psychology and art...[and] Greek vases for scenes of everyday life’ (*MRLWAG*, 2006, 21.48). Unlike Scott and Lytton, Mary Renault enters the psychology of the past, as Gideon Nisbet says, ‘not just doing the archaeology as props...[but] also doing cultural attitudes’ (*MRLWAG*, 2006, 21.48), bringing fluid sexuality into an depiction of the period, for example. As Fleishman has written,

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 (1972, p.256).

All these social and literary developments result in an historical novel that is very different in important ways. Her novel is framed in a first-person narrative, with the focus of the novel psychically much closer to the narrator, making those experiences more central for the reader than before. While Scott and Bulwer-Lytton rely on narratorial intrusion into the story, this intervention does not occur in Renault’s novel, which instead

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<sup>19</sup> Categorized as ‘Un-labelled histories; Addition biographical details or anecdotes; Works relevant to Alexander’s life and times; Works known to Alexander, which certainly or probably influenced his thought; For the legend’ (Renault, 2005, p.269-70).

depends on internal dialogue, here the narrator's own experience, to convey crucial information, making 'historically plausible the legend-ridden past' (Fleishman, 1971, p.256). To achieve this effect Renault uses a first-person narration, with an old Theseus looking back on his youth. 'I thought' is used over fifty times in the novel, twenty of these to introduce the character's private imaginative world, bringing a level of psychological realism and unreliability to her writing, not seen in the three authors above. For example, when telling of how he cleared Attica of brigands, her narrator contradicts the legends that have apparently already grown up about him, defamiliarizing and establishing authority over the narrative, introducing an unreliable narrator and also allowing her to skim over essentially repetitive beats in the story:

I met no monsters, nor did I kill a giant with a cudgel; a fool's weapon for a man with spear and sword....Now, after the years, these scrimmages get confused together in my mind, except the last (Renault, 2004, p.59)

While Morris brought a fantastical element to historical fiction, Renault reforming the historical fantasy of the Theseus legend and makes it realistic. The killing of Phaia the she-boar is depicted straightforwardly as part of a hunt (Renault, 2004, p.90). The mythic Labyrinth, which the minotaur inhabits, is not a maze but a palace warren, filled with 'long pillared passages lined with bins...tunnels with bays set back for casks and chests; a maze of dim caves, stoppered with darkness' (Renault, 2004, p.257). And the minotaur is not a monster, but a bastard son (Renault, 2004, p 201).

The key moment of minotaur's killing is also made realistic, as is Theseus' subsequent abandoning of Minos' daughter Ariadne on Naxos. In the traditional narrative, found in Hesiod and most other ancient sources, Theseus abandons Ariadne, who then marries Dionysus. Rationalising this course of events, Renault has Ariadne caught up in a local Dionysian festival, which ends with her caked in the blood of the man playing the role of Orpheus. Theseus' reaction to the sight of her is shown in a realistic manner:

For almost a year I had sat by the Cretan ring, and watched the Bull Dance....I had seen the death of Sinis Pinebender, and kept the face of a warrior. But now I turned away and leaned upon an olive-tree, and almost threw the heart up from my body. I heaved and shivered in the chill of evening; my teeth chattered, and water poured from my eyes (Renault, 2004, p.343).

Like Morris, Renault's writings came less from a short, defined period of research and more from a lifelong love of Classical Greek civilisation, which began during her teens, when she read Plato's *Republic* (Sweetman, 1994, p.18). Renault was clearly also aware of

the archaeological work that had been carried out on Knossos, as she weaves archaeological discoveries into her depictions of the Labyrinth:

everything about Mary Renault's depiction of the Palace at Knossos is accurate – the russet columns, double axes, storerooms with great earthenware jars, the griffin-frescoed Throne Room, a Central Court with porticoes and galleries that may have been the setting for the bull games, and even the monkeys painted on the walls of Phaedra's bedroom (Dick and Moore, 1972, p.66).

And, as Dick and Moore go on to observe, she also brings archaeological evidence into the events of the novel, responding to Rigney's historical sublime with a fictional explanation, by offering the reader 'archaeological fiction' (Chapter Two, p.209):

Scholars believe that an earthquake destroyed Knossos about 1400 BC, yet the excavations have revealed that an anointing ceremony which seems to have been interrupted violently was taking place in the Thorne Room at about the same time. The earthquake will occur in the novel, and the ceremony will be Asterion's investiture (1972, p.68).

Again, like Morris, her research focus is less on the chain of chronological events for her story than on a broader cultural interest in the period surrounding the historical events, giving her work a 'universality of vision, and imaginative sympathy with the men of the past' (Fleishman, 1972, p.xiii). In the bibliography to her biography of Alexander the Great, *The Nature of Alexander* (footnote, p.222), she reveals the range of 'grounding', including non-textual sources, as Renault explained: 'Greek vases [feature] all kind of daily things... which you would not read about in a book' (*MRLWAG*, 2006, 21.48).

When asked about the purpose of her own work, Renault said she asked herself a simple question: 'And I thought what was it like to be among these people. What was it actually like?' (*MRLWAG*, 2006, 01.34). This motivation separates Renault from Bulwer-Lytton, Morris or Scott. She is starting not with a didactic desire to instruct, like Bulwer-Lytton, or even entertain, like Scott, but from a mimetic motive to discover, excavate, or to enter the past. Integral to Renault's sense of realism is her concern for authenticity, of which Renault defined her own standards in her afterword to *The King Must Die*:

I have never, for any reason, in any historical book of mine, falsified anything deliberately, which I knew or believed to be true. Often of course I must have done through ignorance what would horrify me if I could revisit the past... (Fleishman, 1972, p.257).

She states her intent, to reach the 'truth', and yet, unlike Ranke or Bulwer-Lytton, above, admits the inherent impossibility of such a quest:

One can at least desire the truth; and it is inconceivable to me how anyone can decide deliberately to betray it; to alter some fact which was central to the life of a real human being, however long it is since he ceased to live, in order to make a smoother story, or to exploit him as propaganda for some cause (Fleishman, 1972, p.xii).

Sue McGregor describes Renault's style of 'plain' writing, which echoes Morris' own preference for simple vocabulary, etymologically descended from Old English:

She said she couldn't use an Ancient Greek voice because Ancient Greek is polysyllabic, and modern polysyllabic English sounds like government speech, so...she chose to write plainly but evocatively (*MRLWAG*, 2006, 14.09).

Unlike Scott and Bulwer-Lytton, Renault makes no claims for authenticity in her work, nor does she list her sources in an introduction, within the text, or in footnotes. Perhaps, like Morris, the proof of research is in the finished novel.<sup>20</sup> And Fleishman's description of her work as 'speculative history' perhaps points to what this thesis terms 'archaeological fiction' (Chapter Two, p.209), which is the ability of historical fiction to explore the historical sublime in a way that adds to the understanding of the period or events in question.

Again, as with Morris, Renault's learning and research, and the realism they go to produce, are part of a lifetime of learning and are innate to the text, which give her novels 'a lustre unlike history, yet conveying the concrete reality of things as they might have affected historical (or pre-historic) heroes' (Fleishman, 1972, p.xii).

The success of her realist approach is evident: she was 'a global bestseller by 1970, with eight Greek-themed historical novels', and contemporary admirers include film director Oliver Stone, historian, Tom Holland, and Hilary Mantel who 'described her work as "a shining light"...[while] Sarah Waters judges the 1972 novel *The Persian Boy* to be "one of the greatest historical novels ever written"' (Hughes, 2015). Her work is also recommended as an introduction to Classical Studies at university (*MRLWAG*, 2006, 47.34). This lasting popular and literary success shows how Renault's realist form of historical novel elevated the genre from the popular but inauthentic, to being authentic both in historical and literary terms. As Nisbet comments 'Since Mary Renault we've not seen anyone else like her...and I do wonder, in part, if that is because of the scale and the overwhelming success of her achievement and the way that her novels have been embraced as a true, or true-enough portrayal of ancient Greece' (*MRLWAG*, 2006, 53.49).

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<sup>20</sup> 'She wears her learning very lightly so all those details come through very naturally through the writing.' Bettany Hughes (*MRLWAG*, 2006, 16.17).



### **Hilary Mantel, *Bring Up the Bodies* (2015)**

To end this selective analytical exploration of the historical novel, we move another fifty-odd years forward to a contemporary novel, Hilary Mantel's *Bring Up the Bodies*, the second in a series that chronicles the life of Thomas Cromwell (c. 1485 – 28 July 1540), a narrative that takes a well-known period of history, namely, that of Henry VIII and his six wives, and defamiliarizes it through the point of view of an empathetic Thomas Cromwell.

As might be expected, the same social, theoretical and scientific changes that separate the work of Morris and Renault, are reflected in Mantel's writing, which is also realistic and psychologically vivid and complex. Like Morris and Renault, her work is based in a broad 'grounding', but also, like Renault, her motivation is not to educate or to present a nostalgic view of a past era, but to transport the reader into the past. But Mantel is also drawing on a wealth of research and theoretical insights that have happened between the time that Renault was writing, and her own time. She is aware of the traditions and flaws of historical fiction, which she describes as having been 'a conservative, nostalgic art form, prone to flatter the reader by embellishing the received version of events, and to soothe the reader, by taking the politics out of the past', and sets herself apart from this nostalgia, saying, 'The counterforce is real history – messy, dubious, an argument that never ends' (Mantel, 2017b, p.4). To become a historical novelist it is necessary to learn the skills of the historian: 'To retrieve history we need rigour, integrity, unsparing devotion and an impulse to scepticism' (Mantel, 2017a, p.7). Despite the past's unknowability, Mantel has said that the historical novelist owes 'the readers an informed imagination' (Mantel, 2013, 21.00). Drawing a distinction between historians and novelists, Mantel goes further, saying that although 'the historian and the biographer follow a trail of evidence, usually a paper trail', the novelist goes further. Like Bulwer-Lytton above (p.218), she identifies the lost 'private life, the private thought, the private word, the unexpressed impulse, the thought repressed, the dream, the inner being, the workings of the psyche' (Mantel, 2013, 21.15) as areas of legitimate fictional exploration. The thrill of historical fiction, according to Mantel is the ability to put 'the past back into process...frees the people from the archive and lets them run about, ignorant of their fates, with all their mistakes unmade' (Mantel, 2017a, p.7).

Like Renault, Mantel places herself within the realist, not romantic, novel tradition. She is concerned with 'truth': 'you don't become a novelist to become a spinner of entertaining lies: you become a novelist so you can tell the truth' (Mantel 2017a, p.6).

Mantel is also explicit in her awareness of what Rigney describes in Chapter Two (p.208) as the ‘imperfection’ of sources: ‘Facts are not truth, though they are part of it – information is not knowledge’ (Mantel, 2017a, p.6), and history is ‘the multiplication of the evidence of fallible and biased witnesses, combined with incomplete accounts of actions not fully understood by the people who performed them’ (Mantel, 2017a, p.4).

When Mantel addresses the question of the purpose of historical fiction, she is nuanced. She states that she attempts to capture both the immediacy of television, and the sense that this is a present moment in time, saying:

History is never cut and dried. Because it happened that way does not mean it had to happen that way and so I am trying to throw contingency back into the process so that the reader can see the moment at which history could have been different (Mantel, 2013, 13.50).

One of the most striking differences between Renault and Mantel is Mantel’s use of the present tense, which has become increasingly popular in literary fiction, with a number of other Booker Prize-winning authors, such as J.M. Coetzee, John Banville and Ian McEwan, all employing it. In his 2010 essay, Philip Pullman criticises the over-use of the present tense, comparing it to the popularity of hand-held cameras in cinema:

It seems to say: ‘We were there when these things happened. They were real. We didn’t have time to adjust the focus on that shot or swing round in time to see who said those words or keep the camera steady. It was all happening there right in front of us. It was all urgent and real (Pullman, 2010).

But this sense of immediacy is exactly what Mantel is aiming for. As she states: ‘What I want is for you to see the shake of the hand-held camera. And see the microphone just intruding into the corner of the frame...’ (Mantel, 2013, 13.50). And, of course, the hand-held camera is one of the major technological differences shaping popular culture and storytelling in the years between Mantel and Renault. Film, television and the internet have come to dominate how stories are told and consumed, with the average Briton spending six percent of their waking life consuming ‘plays and movies and...television drama’ (Dutton, 2010, p.109). This figure covers performances only, and does not include reading. Bestselling author Lee Child also explicitly comments on the pressures of time on a readership,<sup>21</sup> again illustrating how Phillips’ model (p.204) of audiences and authors influencing each other continues to be relevant. Simply put, because the pressure on

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<sup>21</sup> ‘A novel has a huge number of competitors now - the internet, video games, streaming movies... a 25-year-old person...have a lot of choices and the book has to earn its place. You've got to suck them into that story.’ (In the Studio, 2017).

reader's time has increased, the need to 'grab' a reader's attention is paramount, as Mantel's opening line, 'His children are falling from the sky' (Mantel, 2012, p.1), demonstrates.

Both Mantel and Renault's works show how the historical novel has expanded its licence beyond a core set of historical sources to include fields of research that did not exist in Scott, Bulwer-Lytton or Morris' times, and the fact that Mantel's historical novels, *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies*, have both won the prestigious Booker Prize illustrates how psychologically and historically realistic historical novels have lost their 'genre' tarnish, and become part of the literary mainstream.

Perhaps Mantel's most startling contribution is the way she expresses the interaction with the historical sublime, showing how contradiction is not a problem to be skirted over, but a vital product of human interaction, and thus the prime duty of the historical novelist:

If you can locate the area of doubt, that's where you go to work. You may well consult original documents, and you will tramp over the ground, and visit the libraries, and allow your hand to hover over a document and imagine the hand that first wrote it (Mantel, 2017c, p.3).

What this quotation also points to is the changing nature of the historical sublime. Unlike Bulwer-Lytton, for example, her research is not limited to the books of a library, but incorporate a range of research activities, including visiting the locations.

It is important to understand that the historical sublime is not finite, but an impression of the infinite, inspired by a small fragment or detail. As more and more fragments of history become available, they each inspire a growing range of the historical sublime. In Chapter Two, we saw how White linked the questions a historian asks of the source material and the type of history that results (pp.200-202). It follows, however, that as the source material changes, so do the kinds of questions that they prompt. For example, because Scott and Bulwer-Lytton relied on historiographical sources to inspire their sublime, their work was largely limited to those sources. Contemporary authors such as Mantel have many more scraps of information at their disposal, and so a more varied sense of the sublime. As historical detail changes, so does the historical sublime, and by extension, the historical novel as well.

The way Mantel presents the process that the responsible historical author performs implies that the historical novelist undertakes an added step to that of the historian, as she says:

The historian and the biographer follow a trail of evidence....The novelist...then performs another act – puts the past back into process, into action – frees the people from the archive and lets them run about, ignorant of their fates, with all their mistakes unmade (Mantel, 2017b, p.7).

But Mantel also states that Scott serves not only as an encouragement but also as ‘a warning to mind what you do’ (Mantel, 2017b, p.4). Of course, Mantel’s anxiety is not new. As we saw in Chapter Two (pp.210-11), the historical novel is part of the longer tradition of historiography, and her concerns were shared by writers such as Defoe and Scott. This is not surprising, considering the similar challenges history presents pre-eighteenth century historians and contemporary novelists. This, in turn, indicates that the historical novel is not a revolutionary form, but an adaptation of pre-eighteenth century historiography, brought about by the imposition of scientific method upon historiographical narratives, as we saw in Chapter Two (pp.210-14).

While some historians have challenged the historical authenticity of her work,<sup>22</sup> Mantel’s opinion on the differences between historians and novelists is a matter of emphasis:

We have covered the same ground... we have to think of it as a parallel universe because historical fiction deals with that by which its very nature never comes onto the historical record....I don't think we're rivals. I think history and fiction can be complementary, but you must take your work as a historian seriously. You owe that to your readers. Your imagination might be running wild, but it must be an informed imagination (Mantel, 2013, 21.15-21.52)

Her belief perhaps expands White’s model (pp.200-1), which showed the connection between the questions asked of source material and the type of history that results, to include historical novelists as well as historians. While the historical record provides dates and events, Mantel is clear in this statement that the interior life of historical figures is her historical sublime. The inner life is an area where historians have no greater level of proof than herself, a novelist. As she said in conversation with historian Diarmaid MacCulloch,

You [the author] have the authority of the imagination, you have legitimacy. Take it. Do not spend your life in apologetic cringing because you think you are some inferior form of historian. The trades are different but complementary (Armistead, 2017).

For the historical novel, which for so long has struggled with questions of authenticity, this is a confident stance. Mantel is implying that a novelist’s speculations are

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<sup>22</sup> ‘it was nonsense to think that Mantel’s novels were historically accurate’ (Guy, 2017).

as valid as the work of a historian, that a historian and a well-informed novelist are complementary.

To summarise, this chapter has traced how the nineteenth-century authors examined above inclined towards the romance tradition, while, with advances in the discipline of history, historiography and archaeology, and the realist trends within the later twentieth-century novel, Renault and Mantel's work is pulled towards both greater historical responsibility and greater psychological realism. This chapter has noted moments referred to, variously, as 'speculative history' (p.224 & p.227), 'plausible' (p.221 & p.225), 'a true-enough portrayal' (p.228) or as a 'parallel universe' (p.231), but all these terms point to the same phenomenon, which I highlighted in Chapter Two, and term 'archaeological fiction' (p.208).

In the fourth and final chapter, I will focus at length on my own work, *Viking Fire*, examining how I responded to the source material and lacunae within it, the choices I made to position the novel, how I brought the chief characters and their world to life, and how I chose the language that I would use to tell this story.

## CHAPTER FOUR

This chapter will be a personal essay setting out my motivation to become a writer, my previous history as a novelist, and more specifically the process of writing *Viking Fire*.

I shall examine how I became a writer and developed a method, how I used those methods to create this piece of fiction, how the writing process was transformed throughout the writing of the book, and how the approaches of other historical novelists informed my own methods. I will examine how I used other sources to create a possible fictional life and voice for him; finally, the chapter will look at the evolution of *Viking Fire* from early sketches to the finished novel. Having reached the end of this PhD thesis, I will end up by offering conclusions about my motivations for beginning this thesis, and my assessment on whether they have been met.

### Spellbound: The Enchantment of Narrative

My interest in reading came late. My parents were both primary head teachers and it was a puzzle and a disappointment to them that I did not like books. I was more interested in batteries and light bulbs, and at the age of seven, found myself with a handful of other slow children in the rudimentary reading group.

‘I think you were dyslexic,’ my mother said to me a long time ago, while these things were still clear to her. ‘But we just didn’t know anything about that then.’

Whatever it was, it all changed when I was ten and I read a book about thirteen dwarves taking vengeance on an ancient and evil dragon. It was called *The Hobbit* and I went straight from that into *The Lord of the Rings* and devoured the three parts of that novel like a child that has been left hungry for too long. After the end of that novel I clung on reading through the appendixes, the essays on language and alphabets, until, at last, I reached the final page and paused.

Looking back with an adult’s eye I would describe the state I was in as being spellbound, a word which to modern minds implies magic. But the Old English meaning of ‘spell’ was ‘story’, a sense still preserved in the word for the

Bible, Gospel –‘Good Story’. To be spellbound, therefore, meant to be enchanted or captured by a narrative; an immersion so compelling that the process seemed to be magical.

I can still picture the moment: I was sitting at the end of the bed, facing into the room the open book in my lap. When I closed the book the spell ended, and I felt a sense of loss, like a love affair that had come to an end.

Like many who pass through a fairie enchantment my immediate response was that I wanted to go back. But I wanted to be more than just being a passive consumer. I didn’t just want to read books. I wanted to make magic.

Writers, then, were, like wizards, mysterious figures. I did not know any, did not meet any, and the only ones I came across were disembodied voices on Radio 4. Their stories all seemed the same: they struggled – often abroad – and generally penniless and rejected, until they were thirty-nine, when their novels were published. That was what I expected from my own writing endeavours, and not knowing how to become a writer, I followed my interests, playing Role Playing Games, like Dungeons and Dragons, which are, in essence, communal storytelling, and then, afterwards, writing down their adventures as stories. My best guide though, was, I thought, to read.

In the classroom I learnt Latin and Ancient Greek, but the stories from that world spoke of a world geographically and imaginatively distant from myself. Being platinum blond, growing up in the old Viking capital of the north, during a time when York’s Viking roots were becoming remarkably evident in the Coppergate Digs, I felt both genetic and geographical connection to the fair haired Vikings. But I also found echoes of Tolkien in Old English and Norse literature. The sense of loss and decay in the Old English poem *The Ruin* chimed with my imagination, while Egil Skallgrimson had composed his poem, *Höfuðlausn*, in Eric Bloodaxe’s hall, in what is now King’s Garth, York. A place I passed through regularly. Retrospectively, I felt I think, what could be described as the appeal of ‘northernness’ that Morris and Tolkien were drawn to. These works matched the weather and the mood of the world I lived in.

As soon as I had finished university, I fixed upon the idea of teaching abroad, and landed a job with Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), in rural China, a

country about which I knew little, except that I liked the food. But with travel and adventure I hoped I would transform my life in a way that would somehow get me closer to being a writer. It was what the authors I had heard on Radio 4 had done. Leaving home was the standard opening to any Dungeons and Dragons adventure. It had worked for Orwell and Baggins. The best stories didn't happen at home. They were something you went away to find.

In January 1993, at the age of twenty-one, I arrived in the town of Yuncheng, Shanxi Province, where I would live for the next three years. I was only one of two foreigners in a town of a hundred thousand people and the next closest foreigners were a twelve hour bus ride away. Before arriving I had read all the books that VSO recommended, which was a mere handful and China was changing at such a pace that most of the books were already out of date. So, I thought, I would remedy this lack of material about the world's most populous country.

At the age of twenty-three I started writing a book that would be published as *A Bend in the Yellow River* (1997). My aim was to educate the reader about modern China, to show the range of characters as I found them, and to counter stereotypes of the Chinese as inscrutable, which I hadn't found to be true. During the rewriting process my editor kept pushing for more of me in the story, but the more the story was told through my gaze the more the Chinese were diminished into pathetic, tragic, or romantic characters. The style of travelogue I had written turned the locals into foreigners in their own land, doing the opposite of what I had hoped for. It was partly because of this that I found the publication process deeply disappointing.

Six years later, after VSO postings in Eritrea and again in China, I came to write my first novel with broadly similar aims, to show the state of Modern China, and to reveal the Chinese people not as other, or somehow indecipherable to Westerners. Novels set in China, written by Westerners, almost without exception<sup>8</sup> include a Western character to 'hold the hand' of the Western reader, as if the Chinese were indeed, too other to comprehend otherwise. I decided not to use this technique, but to take the Western reader straight into a Chinese world.

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<sup>8</sup> The other exception I am aware of is Nobel Prize winner, Pearl S. Buck (1892-1973), in her Good Earth Trilogy.



Depicting modern China through fiction rather than factual writing was much more satisfying, and I think, successful in fulfilling the aims sketched out above. An all-Chinese cast of characters forced the Western reader into the local's heads and psyches and challenges. In order to build a convincing world I combed through Chinese novels and poems and autobiographies, looking for authentic Chinese ways of describing their world, with slogans such as 'The Immortals are Jealous of the Lifestyle of Our 'Officials'' (Hill, 2001, p.6) and a description of grief 'turning slowly in her guts.' (2001, p.13). Another method I used was to take my fluency in Chinese language patterns to flavour the language of the novel, replacing common expressions, such as 'How are you?' with the equivalent Chinese greeting, 'Have you eaten?' (Hill, 2001, p.124). That novel went on to win a record breaking advance, and also to win the Betty Trask and Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prizes. Success was much more difficult to deal with than failure, and in looking for a follow-up I felt I had said all I could about the modern world, and so turned to the past for stories and inspiration.

When I started writing historical fiction I was presented with similar challenges as I had been with that first novel, namely to create a coherent and convincing foreign land and culture to life, although this one was separated by time and culture and place. I will talk about how I did this below, but first I will talk about one of the major differences between a book about a country thousands of miles away, and one that is a thousand years distant: namely how I responded to the evidence available for Harald's life, and the gaps within that.

### **The Child is the Father of the Man**

Chapter One (pp.194-98) has surveyed the sources, chiefly *Heimskringla*, and how they predominantly focus on Harald's later time in Norway. I was not interested in retelling the saga material, but imagined *Viking Fire* to be a companion text to the parts of *Heimskringla* that focus on Harald. Something that people who had read the saga could appreciate, while also being a work that someone who had little knowledge of the period could also enjoy.

Standards for any work of fiction, or historical fiction, are variable. I used novels that had impressed me as a model for my own. One fundamental parameter is how much respect you give to the facts. I feel cheated by a historical

novel that misrepresent the past<sup>3</sup>, often a kind of novel that overly simplifies the past, modernising characters, their psychologies and their choices, in order to make either the writing easier, or the novel more popular. I decided early on, therefore, that the novel would also be as accurate and as truthful to the sources even where they were inconvenient.

As illustrated in Chapter One (pp.194-8) the paucity of the source material presents a problem, as beyond the skaldic poems embedded in the text, all our facts about Harald had already undergone a process of serial fictionalisation through Snorri's own writing, and the oral traditions he was drawing on, which themselves had been fictionalised by Harald and his companions during their time in the Mediterranean. And while we assume that Snorri's efforts were honest and rigorous, he was also transforming his material with mistakes, biases, and limitations of his account, some of which were referenced in Chapter One (p.196).

I used the word 'problem' above, but I as I worked on the novel and the critical thesis, and specifically the idea of the historical sublime (pp.209-10), I came to understand the fictionalised basis of Snorri's narrative as liberating. The oral tradition is uncertain, a fact that Harald himself refers to within the novel, stating 'Tales change with each telling, I have found. The listener prods the teller into untrodden ground' (p.89).

As seen in Chapter One (p.197) one of the main lacuna of Snorri's account is that of Harald's childhood, consisting of only two hundred and forty-four words, a simple chronology without causation or consequences or explanation, beginning thus:

Harald Sigurdson was a half-brother of King Olaf the Saint; they had the same mother. Harald took part in the Battle of Stiklestad where King Olaf was killed. Harald was wounded in that battle, but managed to escape, along with many other fugitives. In the words of Thjodolf Arnorsson....(Magnasson and Palsson, 1966, p.45)

For this period there is no direct historical evidence to fill in these gaps beyond a couple of anecdotes related about Harald as a child in *St Olaf's Saga* (Magnus and Palsson, 1966, p.30-1). Where evidence is lacking it is necessary for

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<sup>3</sup> For example, in *The Last Kingdom*, Bernard Cornwell's Author's Note states, 'The one large change I have made was to bring Ubba's death forward by a year, so that, in the next book Uhtred can be elsewhere.' (Cornwell, 2005, p.333).

the historical novelist to draw upon research and imagination to provide a background, setting and context, to get insights into what might have happened, or even, to borrow Snorri's principal of telling what *probably* happened (Magnus and Palsson, 1966, p.52).

My earliest fictional drafts were essentially a retelling of Snorri's own account, offering little new to the story, but these moments were doorways into the past, that, although they were subsequently cut, provided the link for the work that survived. Ultimately, it seemed a shame to not reference Snorri's source material, however, especially because they compose the few 'facts' upon which our knowledge is based. One of the ways I had of referencing this earlier material was through the character Thorgred, who recalls stories come of these stories that either happened before Harald was born, or he would have been too young to know or see or remember, "Oh! Olaf used to drive your father to distraction,' she said. 'He sent him away in the end, when he was twelve. He was sick of being mocked.'" (p.32) While, in another historiographical gesture, my narrative offered pseudo-explanations for how some of the apocryphal stories about Harald's Sicilian sieges came about, offering them up as fanciful stories told to while away the time:

Or have you heard the one about the men who tied burning faggots to the tails of rats and let them loose, and they ran through the town, putting all to flame? Or the one where men dug a tunnel under the walls, and came up like rabbits on the other side? ...We told each other all these ludicrous tales as we sat and waited and stared at the city walls, and waited for something to happen. (p.176)

The quest for glory is a repeated motif in Germanic poetry, but glory needs an audience, so in defining my Harald, I had to establish the question of who exactly was Harald trying to impress? Again, my first drafts used the sources, where they exist, as their starting point. In attempting to reconstruct a possible childhood I brainstormed answers to about fifty questions, roughly grouped into physical appearance, childhood and their mental world. Some of these appeared to elicit inconsequential answers, such as 'How does the character move?'; 'Does the character have any medical problems?'; 'Who are they closer to, their mother or father?'; 'What is their favourite place?'; 'Who do they admire?'; 'What three things do they fear?' But altogether, in answering these with a combination of research

and gut instincts, I birthed a character, my Harald, who was intimately linked to my imagination, and who began to take on a life of his own.

I wrote about twenty thousand words that covered this early time in Harald's life, but when coming back to edit them, I felt that some were too close to Snorri's account, while others did not move the story forward, or be the kind of story that I imagined Harald telling about himself, an added complication in deciding what and how Harald would have reminisced about his life.

Having written these draft scenes I went back over them and panned through the grit for specks of gold. I discarded scenes that didn't seem to add anything new to Harald's childhood, were repetitious, or which felt like simple colouring in the black and white scenes sketched out in *Heimskringla*. As my imaginative scenes began to gather their own momentum, my own scenes replaced the earlier ones. But one theme that came up and seemed central to Harald as an adult looking back on his life was his relationship with his brother, Olaf. Which then begged the question of what kind of household did Harald grow up in? We can surmise he had a privileged background, being the son of a 'petty king', but what did that entail?

When learning to write, in China, I met no writers, but did meet and talk with a lot of local artists. The act of writing also seemed very similar to the art of traditional Chinese painting (Figure. 1, below). Both reduce the world to black and white, leave most of the page bare for the viewer or reader to imagine themselves, and through the detailed and closely observed details that are present, either in words or strokes, imply a larger landscape. And rather than trying to depict the factually real world they present the essence of the world, or, to use a distinction from Chapter Two, they depict not facts, but the truth. (p.206) It was partly through thinking through this process, and in being influenced by writers', such as Bruce Chatwin, use of detail, which was always highly specific, that I developed my own writing style. Specific details spark the reader's imagination and imply a larger world than is actually there. This happens in a way that is similar to the way that fragments of historical detail inspire the historical sublime (p.209).



**Figure 1: ("ancient ink and ink landscape painting," n.d)**

Details then, are very important to my writing and whilst working on this novel I went through poems, histories, autobiographies, archaeological surveys looking for specific details that could help bring my work to life. But I was also prompted by the historical record. One such detail, from *Heimskringla*, was that Sigurd, Harald's father, was nicknamed 'Sow' on account of his love of farming over warfare (Norsk Biografisk Leksikon). If this detail is right, then Sigurd might be the kind of father who makes his sons work on the farm. If so, the next question is what kind farm-work would Harald be expected to do? Again, we are not entirely clear of the answers. I wrote many exploratory scenes which established a childhood with more housework and farm-chores than a king might like to admit to, which did not make it into the final novel, but informed my writing. In Chapter Two, The Northern Way, while the stories are of 'gods and giants and matchless men who died rather than submit' (p.16) – a maxim that continues through the book – the everyday details of Harald's childhood are of boredom, pigsties, fields, cart-work, chaff, milk-yard, hedge-birds, hoes, scythes, freshly swept hearth-stones, burrs, ticks and fresh straw. It is, in many ways, hopefully a description the 'Middle Earth' of common men, 'between the hulk of the mountains...and the depths of the fjords' (p.20), the middling existence that his father, as a farming man, represents. But as well as trying to detail his life, the line 'I even carried water, like a girl' (p.70) through inference implies a larger world with its own rules and codes. I also wanted to allow the possibility that Snorri

misinterpreted the nickname 'Sow' and to put the other interpretation into the narrative, revealed to the Christian Harald during his time with the pagan Swedes, who still understand the heathen beliefs and stories and tell him, 'Your family must be sacred to Freya' (p.66).

Harald's relationship with Olaf changes half way through the chapter and Harald's young self is shown a physical representation of kingliness in the shape of his brother, King Olaf the Stout, the future St. Olaf.

Harald's relationship with Olaf is presented rather simplistically in *Heimskringla*, but I wanted it to be complex, as any sibling relationship is. Of all the children of their mother, only Olaf and Harald, the oldest and youngest, seemed to have inherited the ambitious gene and there must have been a complex sibling relationship especially on Harald's part, being one of both admiration and jealousy, and which would have changed throughout Harald's life.

This changing relationship is tracked through Chapter Two where Harald's earliest aspirations begin childlike and childish. He begins by fantasizing a Germanic ideal of dying to defend his brother, 'and my name would always be remembered as King Olaf's brother.' (p.16) After meeting Olaf, however, his brother's physicality is a disappointment to the child. What follows is one of the few scenes that are taken from *Heimskringla*, where Olaf greets his brothers, and Harald pulls his beard. The moment is reimagined to make it fresh, so that while Snorri uses the anecdote to illustrate Harald's courage, in my version it focussed on Harald's disappointment, the sibling rivalry he feels, and the instant friction that the moment causes between the two brothers: which sets up the idea that both brothers are looking for maternal approval. While the essential details are the same the altered perspective refreshes the story and supplies the reader with alternative interpretations.

The sibling rivalry continues through the chapter, and ends with Olaf responding to his own grievances about his childhood in Sigurd's hall. The appearance of an external threat, the killer whales, brings the brothers together and with the slaughter of the herring shoal there is a metaphorical echo of the Germanic warrior code and the celebration of death in battle, a fate that ended both Olaf's and Harald's careers. This link is made explicit in the line, 'for a moment our bodies were joined....two half-brothers made one' (p.25).

In Chapter Three, Olaf flees the kingdom rather than fight, and this is the first of a number of tests, including his parents' deaths, that Harald passes through on his way to becoming, not just a man, but his own man. This scene also permanently fixes the warrior ethic in which the hero, inevitably, dies in battle as he is given the almost impossible creed a number of times, with simple exhortations 'Never flee...Never fear' (p.25).

As I said in Chapter Two, (p.208), my aspiration is to find through archaeological fiction 'truths' that are not apparent in the sources. With *Shieldwall*, having worked through the story and the character of Knut,<sup>4</sup> it struck me that through the Danish king's experience of men breaking their oaths to him, Knut would have respected loyalty above all other qualities, a hunch given gravitas after conversation with a notable Viking academic who noted that one of Knut's early law changes was to increase the punishment for oath-breaking.

In *Viking Fire* it struck me that as a child, Harald witnessed at first hand the undermining of Olaf's political power by Knut's wealth, which might explain Harald's later accumulation of 'an immense hoard of money, gold and treasure of all kinds' (Magnus and Palsson, 1966, p.52) in the Mediterranean, and his later reputation for avarice.

Olaf's flight in 1028 would also have reshaped Harald's presumably positive view of Olaf, feelings would have been made more complex yet, when Olaf - better known in life for womanising and violence - was made a saint. If there was sibling rivalry, then how to win the approval of a dead mother, or compete with a brother who has been sanctified? And as Harald grows, how does he manage a rivalry that he cannot win, despite all his achievements?

These rivalries are essentially unsolvable problems for Harald, perhaps explaining his energy, ambition and drive, which led him across three continents, and perhaps also explain his later reputation for being both a hard-ruler, and stingy with his wealth. But sibling rivalry is not a static thing. It would have changed and altered throughout Harald's life as he successfully defended his crown against

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<sup>4</sup> I picked this spelling for the Danish king's name after editorial pressure, as the more common Cnut, was deemed too close to a four letter swear word for comfort. This didn't seem a major point to give way on, and as 'Knut' is the spelling used in the 'Noggin the Nog' stories I enjoyed as a child, as well as following the linguistic pattern of words like 'knight' and 'knee' which have a distinctive Germanic spelling - I was content.

rebellion and the kinds of external pressures that Olaf had earlier failed to deal with.

One of the shadows in Harald's early life is that of Knut, who does not appear in the story, but has the gravitational pull to set many of the events in the story into place, notably Olaf's death and Harald's exile. As Harald became increasingly successful, it seems that another dead person whom he is trying to out-do was Knut himself, an idea, which for me is the best way of rationalising why Harald thought that the throne of England belonged to him in 1066.

### **Personal and Physical Geographies: Landscape, Journey and Harald's Inner World**

One of the main biases in *Heimskringla* and the stories that inform it, is the Christianisation of Iceland and Norway, as exemplified in the person of Snorri, a Christian writer attempting to make sense of an already corrupt and incomplete tradition. As discussed below, from a distance of nearly a thousand years, it is hard to understand exactly what Snorri's biases were, or even what Harald's personal faith was, although we have some broad brush stroke evidence from Anglo-Saxon sources of how nobles and clergy interacted.

At the time of Harald's birth, much of Norway had undergone a violent conversion to Christianity, which *Heimskringla* states started in A.D. 995, but which was still incomplete twenty years later, when Harald was born, and would be completed by Olaf, the country's future patron saint. When Olaf left Norway (c. 1007) he was a pagan, was baptised in Rouen (c. 1014/5) and, according to the *Heimskringla*, was sailing towards the Mediterranean when a dream told him to return to Norway to Christianise it (Winroth, 2014, p.116).

Despite the 'Christianisation' of Norway, pagan beliefs would have certainly continued, though it is hard to be sure what exactly these beliefs constituted, or if they were anything resembling an organised religion. Through the *Poetic* and *Prose Eddas*, and the surviving skaldic poems, we have a glimpse of the corpus of Norse Mythology, but, as was written down in Iceland nearly two hundred years since the *kristnitaka* (literally, 'the taking of Christianity') of Iceland (1000 A.D.), at a time when Norse pagan beliefs and practices were little understood, which again complicates the situation. While there are New Age



books that claim to represent Norse belief, the main academic view is that it is difficult to know for sure what precisely Norse pagan belief and practice entailed. With Christianity we appear to be on surer ground, but as Fletcher notes (1998, p.410-412), the belief structures of medieval converts was far more complex than later Christian chroniclers would have it.

In a largely illiterate world, where scripture was the largely the preserve of monasteries, faith was primarily a matter of declaration and ritual, rather than inner belief, nodded at with details such as when the assertion is made by Harald to Olaf that their mother ‘was buried according to Christian ritual.’ (p.39).

Lines must have been indistinct and blurred, a process compounded with the common practise of evangelising Christians in subsuming pagan ritual and places into Christianity. I was keen, therefore, to show Harald growing up in a world where a range of beliefs were acceptable at the same time, for example in brief asides such as ‘She let out a breath. A casual pagan curse, that people did then, without thinking and bent me over her knee to get me in the square of light from the open shutters.’ (p.18) The state of religious transformation is flagged up when Harald compares his faith to that of Theodora: ‘Her God was different to mine. She spoke of humility, forgiveness, faith. Mine was a warrior, proud, resolute, defiant in the face of darkness’ (p.162). And beneath the superficial Christianity of Harald’s voice is the underlying pagan theme of Odin learning runes through the sacrifice of an eye, where knowledge is hard-won: ‘as if I could stay childlike for a little longer, and refuse the wisdom that hurt can bring’ (p.27). A line which also demonstrates Harald’s knowledge of Norse mythology, necessary for any Skald of any worth, again referenced in lines such as ‘I was like Thor, whose horn held all the seas, who tries to drink it down’ (p.125).

Perhaps a better source for a contemporary world view is the gnostic collection of Eddic poems named the *Hávamál* (Jonasson, 2002), which gives straightforward and practical advice on manners, hospitality, women, reputation, and exemplary modes of behaviour. When trying to build worlds, proverbs often preserve archaic world views, and there are many proverbs preserved in the saga material, another valuable way of accessing a communal store of wisdom (Harris, 2017).

One of the mythic features of Norse geography was the semi-fictional dread place that is named Mirk Wood. It was a name that Tolkien used in his fantasy setting, and so I wanted in this novel to point to the factual origin being the eastern forests of modern Russia. In naming the various stops along the portages of the Russian and Ukrainian part of Harald's journey, I consulted names of North American trading points, as that seemed to reflect a similar cultural moment of exploration and interaction: Muddy Bank, Shingle Point, White Dog Post, Beaver Lake, and Battle River (pp.98-100) . When trying to visualise the world he was in, sixteenth-century woodblocks prints and photographs of Czarist Russia and the fur trade (Kuerschner, 1903), provided scenes and details that would have not been too dissimilar to the world that Harald was moving through. While, in terms of the day-to-day life the experimental archaeology of Pavel Sapozhnikov, who spent eight months living as an eleventh-century Rus (Wollaston, 2014), gave a sense of the oppressive physical conditions of that world, again, which would not have been dissimilar to what Harald encountered within eleventh-century Russia.

One way of attempting to rediscover the undiscoverable was by looking at alternative texts. One such was a result of Charlemagne's ninth-century subjugation and conversion of the Saxons, a book named the *Heliand* (Murphy, 1992), a translation of the Bible into an Old Saxon epic poem. Although it was translated two hundred years before the events of the novel, for a tribe living in what is now modern Germany, the translators had a challenge similar to that which eleventh-century missionaries to Norway had: to make a pacifist religion that championed low-status, appeal to a warlike and aristocratic elite. The way that the translators of the *Heliand* modified the Christian message provides insights into possible ways the Christian message was made palatable to the Norse and insights into Harald's possible mythic viewpoint. For example, in the nativity stories there is no mention of the story of 'no room for them at the inn' for Joseph and Mary. The two travellers are recast as royal travellers, and in the subsequent nativity scene, the sheep and shepherds are instead made to be (much more royal) horses and horse guards who would have been trusted, or honoured servants (Murphy, 1992, p.15-18). Through the lines 'Joseph and Mary set off for home...the King of Heaven, the Son of the Chieftain, the Protector of Multitudes as their

companion...’ (Murphy, 1992, p.27) we see the inversion of status: the King of Heaven is the warrior-companion, the retainer of Mary and Joseph, pointing towards the Germanic ethos that God was a force that could be invoked to join the warrior band of a king. And after Christ’s baptism, the dove, which in the Bible, flies over Christ, lands on Christ’s shoulder, as the two ravens, Consciousness and Memory, land on Odin’s shoulders (Murphy, 1992, p.35). By going through this text, it was possible to build up an impression of how Harald, at this point of religious flux, might have viewed his Christian faith. Harald’s beliefs would have changed as he grew, and it was important to follow these changes through his character and voice.

In the scenes between Harald’s escape from Stiklestad and his arrival in Onund’s hall, Harald grows from a child to a man to hero. I originally wrote these scenes in a realist manner, but it felt hard to convey the transformational effect of these months, and so, going back to this section, I deliberately blurred the boundaries of fact and fantasy, mimicking Joseph Campbell’s arc of the typical hero’s journey which involves a series of symbolic tests.

There are the natural dangers of elk, mountain and the weather. Harald masquerades as the wandering figure of Odin by using the name ‘Ganglari’, and in the mountain hut with Fritha and Grim, he is given pagan advice and understanding. This section uses some of the tropes of Icelandic fairy tales, where the protagonist finds that time has moved differently in the real world to time within the enchanted space. Harald says, ‘I only stayed there a moon-turn, but it felt like a year had passed’ (p.68). And as he looks back to the home where he has sheltered it appears like a fairy mound of Icelandic stories, ‘I stopped and turned and looked back at the shieling, and in my mind’s eye it seemed as if it was not a house, but an old mound, where ancient kings are buried.’ (p.69).

After this Harald has to overcome a household who suspect him of being a thief, and mean him ill test his ability to flee and escape. Having escaped danger Harald’s next temptation is the chance to settle down, and live a safe life, as he stays with a family who offer him their daughter in marriage. He rejects this also. And when Helgulf tells him, ‘You’ve fought in a battle, and crossed the Keelbacks in winter. A man could settle down for a life on those two tales.’ (p.80) Harald’s

ambition prevents him. ‘The truth of it was that those two tales didn’t seem enough. I wanted a saga’s worth’ (p.80).

These tests reveal Harald’s nature. From now on he is the hero who will adventure throughout Christendom and that was a very different world to describe.

One crucial setting was Constantinople, which the Norse named Miklegard, ‘the great city’, which itself gives an impression of how Vikings viewed the Byzantine capital. The visual reconstruction by Antoine Helbert (Figure 2) gave a valuable visual guide to the city and what Harald might have seen as he arrived and lived within the city; while Marcus Rautman’s work provided a few facts about the day-to-day life and living conditions, which acted as imaginative spurs giving an impression of what it would be like to enter this city and to walk its streets (Rautman, 2006).



**Figure 2: Architect’s reconstruction of Constantinople, circa A.D. 1000**

©Antoine Helbert (2018)

Harald’s travels also took him to places or cultures similar to where I have lived. The description of Jerusalem, ‘On one side worked a row of silver-beaters. They sat on the floor, bent-backed and tap-tap-tapping on little anvils that they held between their legs’ (p.158) was taken from my notes taken from a trip to Damascus in 1995, while the details of water being delivered by boys with donkey (p.159), women using ‘the hems of their skirts to waft the embers back to life’ (p.164), and the prevalence of flies, and specifically mating flies, are all taken from my time as a VSO volunteer in Eritrea (1995-97).

Having sketched out the setting and familial surroundings, as well as the religious for the young Harald, it was time to get him to speak.

### **Bringing a Character to Voice**

I wrote above about my desire to enchant a reader. In stories, such of those of Ursula le Guin, when a magician casts a spell, the slightest mistake in tone or intonation can cause the spell to go terribly wrong. My experience living abroad, speaking foreign languages and writing trans-national novels, makes me very aware of the nuances of language, and the fact that, in historical fiction, a misstep in the language of a narrative can heighten or fracture the spellbound state of the reader.

A novel written in contemporary English about a period of time a thousand years distant is anachronistic in myriad ways. Before starting *Shieldwall* I retaught myself Old English in order to get a feel for the language's rhythms, and excluded words of French derivation as much as possible, which allowing words that came from Latin, as this was widely understood through literate Anglo-Saxon society. While I was as careful as possible with the word choice in *Shieldwall*, one reviewer complained about the words 'tapestry' when it should have been 'embroidery', and the word 'lunch', which I had passed over blithely, but which for him was 'a 16th-century concept'.<sup>5</sup>

A startling approach is supplied by Paul Kingsnorth's *The Wake*, where a constructed language attempts to capture the flavour of Old English, for example from the beginning of the novel:

the night was clere though i slept i seen it. though i slept i seen the calm hierde naht  
only the still. when i gan down to sleep all was clere in the land and my dreams was full  
of stillness but my dreams did not cepe me still (2015, p.1).

Kingsnorth explains why he uses this invented language thus:

Our assumptions, our politics, our worldview, our attitudes – all are implicit in our words, and what we do with them. In order to have any chance of this novel working, I realised I needed to imagine myself into the sheer strangeness of the past. I couldn't do that by putting 21st century language into the mouths of eleventh-century people. So I constructed, almost by accident, my own language: a middle ground between the Old English that would have been spoken by these characters and the English we speak

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<sup>5</sup> ("Shieldwall by Justin Hill - review | Books | The Guardian," n.d.)

today. The result is a book which is written in a tongue that no one has ever spoken, but which is intended to project a ghost image of the speech patterns of a long-dead land: a place at once alien and familiar. (2019, Kingsnorth)

His is a striking solution to the anachronism of the historical novel, which attempts to portray the past. His book was published through the crowd funding website, Unbound, and as one of his early subscribers I was keen to read his work, but ultimately found his language unconvincing. It did not ring true as a variant of Old English, and did not seem to present ‘a ghost image of the speech patterns of a long-dead land’ any more than our own do. What it does do, however, is defamiliarise the reader from the present. A trade-off against the readability of the novel.

While I used many of the same strategies to bring Harald and his world to life as I had with *Shieldwall*, avoiding words that evoked a contemporary world or manners and aimed, wherever possible, to use simple straight-forward words, which tend to be of an Old English derivation.<sup>9</sup> It was clear to me, however, that I could not use the same language register for *Viking Fire* as I had for *Shieldwall*, without the novel feeling too Anglo-Saxon, or too similar to *Shieldwall* by readers who read both books, nor without feeling artistically that I was retracing a worn path. One book is set in the educated and Christianised Anglo-Saxon world, and the just being Christianised world of the North. The language should therefore feel linguistically distinctive.

I didn’t know Old Norse, and so didn’t feel able to write contemporary English that carried over the characteristics of Old Norse and did not want to fall into the trap of putting ‘21st century language into the mouths of eleventh-century people’ (2019, Kingsnorth). While keeping to a simple, primarily Germanic language base, for a number of reasons, as a compromise I allowed myself more latitude. Most importantly, it seemed that having spent much of his life living and working in the Byzantine Empire and other non-Norse speaking areas, Harald would no doubt have picked up a wide range of concepts, words and ways of speaking that reflected that exposure. To limit his language to a purely Old Norse flavoured language would have been to impose unrealistic linguistic purity upon

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<sup>9</sup> This effort is reflected in the Flesch Reading Ease score of 92 for the first twenty thousand words, which is classified as ‘very easy’ to read; a Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level of 3.3, and an overall reading age of 8-9 year olds.

his language. And the advantage of a broader linguistic base would therefore reflect his cosmopolitan background, and subtly subvert stereotypes of the Vikings. I therefore allowed words such as ‘avalanche’, as alternatives, such as ‘land-slide’, did not describe the image that I wanted. And despite the fact it’s a eighteenth century French borrowing (Online Etymological Dictionary) I felt the word did not hint overly towards a more complicated awareness of the world, whilst adding a subliminal sense of a foreign vocabulary and exposure, which reflects Harald’s background.

Clearly there are self-imposed limits. One of those is the Dark Ages trigger words, often gleaned from Old English poetry such as the *Wanderer* and the *Seafarer*, such as ‘hoar’ and ‘rime’, that must be used with care. While they are valuable for evoking the age they can be cliché, for example, in Winroth (2014), where a fictional reconstruction of a Viking feast in a hall is relies on predictable detail which evoke, disastrously, all the poor-quality pastiches about Vikings that you have read before:

Finally the chief took his high seat. The warrior band had waited eagerly on the benches around the great hall, warmed by the crackling fire, quaffing bounteous mead (Winroth, 2014, p.1)

These words have to be used sparingly and with care. And their familiarity touches on what Kingsnorth terms as the importance of de-familiarising a modern, probably urban reader, to a world that is rural and past.

There are many ways of defamiliarising a subject matter, not solely limited to vocabulary. When talking about time, for example, it is useful to refer to a pre-clock world, where time was measured in ways that related to the physical world, such as ‘After as long as it took the tree’s shadow to move six paces round.’ (p.34) With height, or distance, measurements are not described in standard measures, but again in relation to the teller, ‘I ran through the June grass. It was as tall as my waist.’ (p.17) And when a familiar image is used, such as knotwork typical of Norse carving and jewellery, it is used to describe the movement of killer whales (p. 24) and Muslim call to prayer. (p.167)

Another way of adding authenticity to the text, and often defamiliarising the modern reader is by using contemporaneous ways of describing the world. Where possible, direct quotes are used, such as in the case of poems or runic inscriptions. Kennings are perhaps the best known features of Viking poetry, but

they are often opaque, and rely on a knowledge of Norse mythology absent amongst the common readers. As a distinctive feature of the courtly art of Skaldic poetry, they did not seem appropriate for what this novel purports to be, which is an autobiographical account of Harald's life. The exception to this, though, is the part in chapter five where Harald recalls the Battle of Stiklestad, and sums up the experience, where he uses kennings whose meaning is clear to modern readers.

I had heard much of battle, but the skalds have it right: it is the roar of Odin, storm of Valkyries; weapon clash; spear storm, edge wind; sword-rain; wound-wind; killing of men; wolf-feast; the judgement of warriors. (p.50)

While you want to avoid the sense of cliché, there are useful linguistic effects from copying styles of language typical of Viking Era poetry. I spent a long time looking for ways of describing, for example, that did not feel clichéd, but which also had some of the patina of the world I was trying to evoke. One way of doing this is by hyphenating simple adjective-noun combinations such as 'well-cut', 'red-cloak', 'straw-rope', 'ale-horn', 'silver-hilted', 'half-brother', 'sheep-thief', the hyphen helping to evoke the feel of Germanic compound words, where simple compounds take the reader into a world of a more limited vocabulary range, typical of a more simple, 'peasant' vocabulary. It's notable that with the exception of 'ale-horn' most of these are not the typical combinations that you find in Viking pastiches.

References to weather in Norse poetry are scarce, and where they are present, like Anglo-Saxon poetry, they tend towards descriptions of winter and the cold. In order to broaden the canvas of descriptions, native to either time or place, I looked for ways that a range of Scandinavian writers and painters, both historical and contemporary, described their physical environment so that I could make Harald appear as though he had grown up in the same environment, with the equivalent native knowledge of his time and place and setting. These range from practical sources, such as Lars Mytting's, *Norwegian Wood: Chopping, Stacking and Drying Wood the Scandinavian Way* (2015), which provided a wealth of information about Norwegian woodland and seasonal activities; visual sources, such as the paintings of Nikolai Astrup (Jones, 2015 & 2016) which not only showed landscape and nineteenth-century lifestyles, but also gave an impression of the feeling of the landscape at various times of the year. One of his paintings, *Marsh Marigold Night* (Figure 3) inspired this line 'There are no flowers here, I thought,



they're all outside, great banks of them, slipping down the mountainsides like an avalanche of yellow.' While his painting, *Kjerringa med lykta* (Old Woman with Lantern, Figure 4), which refers to a Norwegian folk tale of an old woman with a lantern bringing winter, inspired this detail:

I tested myself as every hero did, though my tests were little things, like scaling the garth apple tree's tallest branch, daring to climb down into the damp dark well-mouth, walking home through the dark forest when the hag of evening was gathering her skirts about her, and you could feel her coming for you, and all you wanted to do was run.



Figure 3: Marsh Marigold Night



Figure 4: Kjerringa med lykta

I also looked to modern writers, such as the late Tomas Tranströmer, whose familiarity with the Swedish landscape and weather is redolent in his poetry, as this line in his poem, *A Winter Night*, shows ("The storm puts its mouth to the house/and blows to get a tone" (2011, p.68)), which inspired this detail (p.18):

When I was a boy, and the winter nights were long and cold, and the storm would put its mouth to the smoke hole, and blow long mournful notes, then we would all gather close to the fire, shoulder to shoulder, our backs to the darkness, hands spread to the flames, as the tale-spinner spun.

Hopefully capturing the authentic Swedish weather and the feelings that it produces for those who endure it.

With Harald's own poems, the factual core of *Heimskringla*, I was presented with a challenge. Previously I had translated the forty-nine extant poems

of a Chinese Tang Dynasty poet, Yu Xuanji, and used those as source material for a previous novel, *Passing Under Heaven* (2005), which went on to win the Somerset Maugham Award (2005). In writing this I had attempted to include all forty-nine poems, and also within the novel's text to both supply a modern reader with tools to understand the Tang Dynasty imagery. My ambition was gradually worn down by the realities of writing a gripping narrative and through the editorial process. The original forty-nine poems were whittled down to a core handful that I felt worked within the poem. An aid to this process was the fact that these poems relied on simplistic and often naturalistic references which translated fairly well to a modern audience, vaguely familiar with Chinese literature through the work of writers like Ezra Pound (1885-1972) and others. Skaldic poetry, however, relies on hermetic kennings that obstruct simple readings, for example, a poem composed by Harald at the Battle of Stamford Bridge:

We do not creep in battle under the shelter of shields before the crash of weapons; this is what the loyal goddess of the hawk's land (woman) commanded us. The bearer of the necklace told me long ago to hold the prop of the helmet (head) high in the din of weapons, when the valkyrie's ice (sword) met the skulls of men. (Rosendahl, 1992, p.297)

The hermetic nature of these poems meant that the poetry was too opaque to work within the text, and so, instead of reproducing them in the novel, I allowed Harald's own voice to have a more contemporary poetic sense.

A final note should be added regarding some of the themes that I also embedded into the narrative. One of these themes is the Viking hero's pursuit of glory and a related theme, recurrent throughout the novel, is how history itself works, where with time and distance all but the most salient facts are lost and forgotten. There are oblique references throughout the text, with metaphorical representations such as this, where the play of light on carved figures mimics the way the historical record both highlights and obscures historical detail:

Where it touched the freshly swept and dampened hearth stones it gilded them with sunlight, lit the carved oak benches too, brought them vividly from the shadows' (p.19).

Another metaphor played with the colour yellow, and how the low-status wearers of such being largely invisible in written histories,

Yellow dye came from the earth. It was the cheapest to make, the colour of old men's fingernails, the smoke-slime on hanging bacon, the thrall's patched homespun. It was a

colour of thieves and trespassers. Close up, you could mistake a man dressed in it for a tree or a bush, nothing of note; viewed from afar and he was invisible (p.34).

Yellow, like the majority of historical lives that return unnoticed to the earth are lost to us, while characters of note wear red, which stands out.

## Harald's Voice

With stereotypes of the Viking age, there is a tendency to make Viking personalities one-dimensional. For example, while both Harald and Alfred the Great reformed their churches, coinage and local government, and would go on to found dynasties that would last nearly two hundred years, narratives about Alfred the Great focus on his early visit to Rome, and the effect that this visit must have had on the mind and learning of the young atheling, while those about Harald, as a Viking, focus almost entirely on his military exploits. To counter this bias, I wanted to show how Harald was changed by his experiences in the Mediterranean, and how, once he returned home, he sought to bring some of the 'civilised world' to Norway, reforming coinage, establishing churches and cities. The register of language used above helps to support this, but again, some of this is referred to directly ('I was expecting a bluff and ill-educated man, but I was surprised' (p.9)), while it is also shown through his actions.

It was decided through pre-writing conversation with my editor that a first person narrative would work well for Harald, making his character more immediate and compelling. I had written travelogues in the first person, but I had not written fiction so was eager for the challenge.

I read a number of novels to help locate Harald's voice, including Marianne Robinson's *Gilead*, Henry Treece's Viking novels, Bernard Cornwell's *Last Kingdom* series, and also – especially for the tropes of a barbarian in a civilised world - Robert E. Howard's *Conan* stories. My aim was to get a 'feel' for the different voices, and how each voice 'worked' with their novel, and how they imparted information to the reader. However, at first, my primary example was the voice of Theseus in Mary Renault's *The King Must Die* (2004, p.3). Her book begins thus:

The citadel of Troizen, where the Palace stands, was built by giants before anyone remembers. But the Palace was built by my great-grandfather. At sunrise, if you look at

it from Kalauria across the strait, the columns glow fire-red and the walls are golden. It shines bright against the dark woods on the mountainside.

And using this as a template for the feel of the world and the narrator's tone the earliest drafts of *Viking Fire*, dated 14th October, 2014, started in this way:

The Uppland hills that fathered me were carved from the bones of Ymir by giants in the days before anyone remembers. Hard in spring, they cling like maids to their covering of snow; in the summer they swell, green and bright against the heavens, and it is glorious to stride out and smell the four winds crossing the skies. But winter is the truest test. The nights are long, the snow thick, and once the morning chores are done, all there is left is to sit close to the fire and listen to each man's tale, to hear how they have won fame.

Having worked on the opening thirty thousand words, I had a better sense of who my Harald was, and, partly in response to the opening of Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*, and hearing her talk about her work, I reworked the novel, towards a voice and a character and story that was more arresting, powerful, immediate and dangerous.

I revised the opening a number of times, so that by 30th January, 2015, the opening line had changed to 'Don't worry, I won't kill you' which implied a listener and established a more immediate relationship between the narrator and audience, the audience who by 6th March 2015, had also become a named character. This change brought in the narrative frame of a chronicler listening to King Harald tell his life's story. Originally, the chronicler was a simple monk, but in order to add greater complexity to the relationship between the characters, his identity was changed to that of another recorded figure from history, Archbishop Ealdred of York, and to heighten the physicality of that opening the first line was changed again to the final version ('Here, man. Take my hand, I will not kill you' (p.13)) which removed the modern colloquial of 'don't worry'. Ealdred's introduction also allowed a reference not only to the physical process of writing and vellum production (p.11), but also to the use of marginalia, and the palimpsest process of historical documents that have been read and added to over time. Ealdred also refers explicitly to the pre-eighteenth century mode of historical writing, begun with Herodotus, who responded to the historical sublime by furnishing 'tales that seemed to fit' (p.11).

I wanted the voices of the two narrators not only to reflect and differentiate their personalities, but to also to add to the artifice that this novel was a real account from the eleventh century. As a positive choice, when writing Harald’s voice, I tried wherever possible to use words of an Old English etymology for the simple and straightforward effect they had, while Ealdred was partly inspired by Lucanius and Priscus in Gore Vidal’s *Julian* (1984), and his ostentatious use of Latin vocabulary mimics that of some later Anglo-Saxon chroniclers. Figure 5, below, shows how the language of the two characters is differentiated. Harald’s language is of a simpler register, with generally shorter words and sentences, while Ealdred’s language is defined by longer sentences, higher register words and more words of foreign derivation.

Figure 5:<sup>6</sup> The first thousand words of each character were put through a variety of tests to highlight how the two different voices differed. This figure illustrates how the two character’s voices differ in word choice and difficulty, grammar and sentence length.

The First Thousand Words of Each Narrator Compared		
Criteria	Ealdred	Harald
Flesch-Kincaid Reading <sup>7</sup> Ease	86.4	97
Average Grade Level <sup>8</sup>	6.2	4.3
Longest sentence by word count	80 [In drawing up...]	33 [He turns and sees behind him...]
Sentences > 30 Syllables	12	5
Longest syllable word	6 (‘hagiographical’, ‘extraordinary’)	4 (‘Northumbria’, ‘miserable’, ‘Sicilian’)
Longest word (by letter)	14 ‘Sanctimoniales’, ‘hagiographical’	13 ‘grandchildren’

<sup>6</sup> Results drawn from (Readable.io, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> The Flesch–Kincaid readability tests are readability tests designed to indicate how difficult a passage in English is to understand. Harald’s score of 97 puts him in at the easier end of the easiest category, ‘Very easy to read. Easily understood by an average 11-year-old student’, while Ealdred’s is mid-point in the next easiest category ‘Easy to read. Conversational English for consumers’ (Wikipedia, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Average from combined Flesch-Kincaid, Gunning-Fox, Coleman-Liau, SMOG Index and Automated Readability Index.

## Naming the Book

One of the last things that I decide is the name of the novel. Ideally, a title should come out of the material and themes embedded within it. The process of naming *Viking Fire*, was different however. When pitching this novel to my publishers the plan had been to name it *The Last Viking*, which summed the character and the novel up well. However, a year after I started work, Berwick Coates published his own novel, about Harald Hardrada, named *The Last Viking* (2014) and my publishers were adamant that my novel had to have a new title.

We went through a number of ideas that seemed to pin the novel to the moment and the man. We came up with a list, including, *1066: The Viking King*, *Last of the Vikings*, *The Last Viking King*, *The Last King of the Vikings*, *The Last Viking*, *Viking Sunset*, *Hardrada*, *To Stamford Bridge*. These all describe the positioning of the novel, linking it both to the events of 1066, which this series was concerned with, but also with the character of Harald himself, and the fact that the so-called Viking Age came to an end with his death.

Of course, almost all of these possible titles used the word ‘Viking’, so emblematic as a word that nothing else will really have the same effect. As mentioned above (p.248), the word Viking itself is anachronistic. In the end my agent and editor liked the name, *Viking Fire*, and so it was named. It is not a title I like and wish it had been published under the original name.

## Influence on my Own Writing

I started this PhD having published two works of non-fiction and three novels, which had won a number of prestigious prizes as well as widespread critical acclaim. Despite this critical success, I did not feel in control or command of my craft, and without a grounding in literary-critical theory I felt hampered by a lack of a wider awareness of my craft, and discipline, and potential.

With regards to the historical novel, I was largely ignorant of the theoretical modelling, traditions and history of the historical novel, and what opportunities the historical sublime presented a novelist. It was partly to remedy this lack of wider awareness and education in the literary field, and specifically of the historical novel, that I undertook this doctoral thesis. As I reflect on my work I think I have achieved my primary aims, and will illustrate this below.

By the selective analysis of the five authors above, I have a much better understanding of the literary tradition of which my work is a small part. The critical thesis has also highlighted for me what these British novelists were attempting to achieve, and how their different aims affected their writing, which in turn gives me a better way of understanding my own impulses to explore the narratives surrounding the Battle of Hastings in 1066 through a series of novels. While this grounding was very informative as I was writing *Viking Fire*, I hope it will also provide a literary-theoretical and creative framework within which I can approach future novels.

One of my primary fears as a historical novelist was that my work should not ring true, or that it would be or proven irrelevant, incorrect or inauthentic. While some of the theoretical models and critics did not resonate with my experience as a writer, one of the theories that I found very compelling was the work of Rigney. Her book, *Imperfect Histories* (2001) contained a number of insights and approaches to historiographical narratives that were illuminating, informative and also liberating, as I will explain below. One of the first observations was the basic idea that Ranke's desire to limit himself to 'what really happened' (von Ranke, 1988, p.57) is impossible: there are areas of history over which no one, even the most informed historian, has absolute authority, and so all histories are both imperfect and incomplete and cannot hope to master history. Because historical narratives cannot hope to master history as it happened, in all its complexities, the aura of unassailability is removed from the historians' own accounts of the past. Rigney's theory also highlights the areas that are particularly rich for novelists, namely the private life of characters, that both Bulwer-Lytton and Mantel refer to above, which are often part of the *hors-texte* (Rigney, 2001, p.101) that goes unrecorded. Understanding the imperfection of historical sources, and the unknowability of the past not only removes some of the authority of narratives written by historians, but they also highlight the area where legitimate fictional exploration is useful.

However, the most valuable part of Rigney's critique is the concept of the historical sublime (pp.209-10), which is the vast, almost unimaginable, amounts of historical detail that have been irrevocably lost; but also, as Bulwer-Lytton and Mantel note in Chapter Three (p.218 & p.228), this is the area of legitimate

fictional exploration. By analysing how other novelists responded to the historical sublime, and how they represented their work has forced me to reflect on my own work. I came to see how *Viking Fire* had been shaped by my response to the areas of historical sublime that are invoked by Snorri's saga, as *Viking Fire* focusses mainly on the periods of Harald Hardrada's life that Snorri left out for want of credible evidence, moments of historical sublimity that seemed to me to deserve fictional investigation, namely Harald Hardrada's childhood, Russian and Varangian years. And while *Viking Fire* focusses mainly on the periods of Harald's life that Snorri glosses over, it also skims over those parts of Harald's life that he recounts in detail. In excavating these areas of historical sublime, *Viking Fire* aspires towards what I have termed in Chapter Two archaeological fiction, offering possible insights into Harald's life and experiences. As stated above, my hope is that *Viking Fire* acts as a companion text to the parts of *Heimskringla Saga*, that have been published in English as *King Harald's Saga*, offering insights into the lost past.

The concept of the historical sublime also is useful in understanding the larger historiographical tradition, of which, this thesis suggests, the historical novel is an adaptation of (pp.210-13). The historical sublime shows why, when crucial information has been lost, writers were forced to invent to make hold the facts of his narrative in a coherent whole. This clearly links the historical novel to writers such as Herodotus, who, while attempting to accurately portray the past, also resorted to fiction in order to make their truths both more mimetic and more truthful.

When I started this series of novels, which began with *Shieldwall* (2011) my hope was that I would challenge the hindsight bias that has infected narratives surrounding the Norman Conquest, in 1066. With Harald Hardrada this hindsight bias assumes that the main challengers for the throne of England were Harold Godwinson and Duke William. Neither of these were professional warriors, nor had led large armies. As the novel demonstrates, Harald Hardrada had done both. As he is seen as a footnote to the events of that year, his extraordinary life being largely overlooked, partly because of his identification of him as a 'Viking', with all the modern clichés that entails, as we saw in Chapter One (p.194) I hope that I have achieved those aims, but as the process of writing and research continued, I



have also reframed and honed my expectations in response to the same questions I asked of the other novelists. In many ways *Viking Fire* appears to have many of the same characteristics that typify the novels of Mantel and Renault. My interest in the Viking Era began in my teens, and the writing draws on long interest in the era and territory covered in the novel. It is a first-person narration, hopefully psychologically complex, and both historically aware and informed, drawing on a wide range of texts that were outlined in Chapter 1 (pp.194-198), and offering, at times, insights into the sublime areas of Harald Hardrada's life.

As well as the history of the historical novel, the critical thesis has also allowed me to reflect at length upon the purpose of historical fiction after the publication of *Viking Fire*, as a form of fiction that has the 'unusual capacity to *do* things' (Mayer, 1997, p. 237). It is a statement that begs the question, what, then, does the contemporary historical novel do? Mantel says her historical fiction is a 'parallel universe' (p.231), that should be considered as 'an addition or alteration of history' (Book Club, 21.00 mins). History and historical fiction then, in Mantel's eyes, should be seen as complementary, offering perhaps the most explicit claim that historical fiction, written by a novelist who takes their work 'as a historian seriously' and works with 'an informed imagination', fulfils a function, bringing history to life, in a way unlike histories.

Ultimately, upon reflection, *Viking Fire* aspires to be an alternative viewpoint upon Harald's story. To ask of his histories, the same question Mantel poses with her fiction, which is, 'consider this?'

One of my first points of reference for this critical thesis was the theory of the historical novel put forward by Lukács. Lukács' work provoked me to articulate what I think is a better way of understanding the function of the historical novel. Although he sees the historical novel as being revolutionary, as outlined above, in Chapter 2 (p.199), the real revolution is the historical narratives of men like von Ranke, for example, which declared that they would be confined solely to the truth. The historical novel, which combines fact and invention, in order to attempt to represent and convey the past, is a modification of the romantic tradition, which Scott reforms, as we have seen in Chapter 2 (pp.202-3). These pre-eighteenth-century narratives follow very similar criteria to those of pre-modern historians such as Snorri, as outlined in Chapter 1 (p.196), similarities

which are understandable, perhaps, considering similar reactions to the historical sublime, and also Duncan's model of the 'historical specific reader', because they were writers who managed to balance fact and fiction in a way that seemed authentic to their audiences. I refer towards this link between the historical novel and the longer historiographical tradition in the frame narrative:

In a few cases, where it was impossible to know what had been thought or imagined at a certain time, I have followed the example of greater chroniclers, such as Herodotus, who furnished tales that seemed to fit.

Where I have invented, I hope that my inventions will do the work of history and that you will not find them too distracting (p.11).

With continued research, I have also articulated the concept of 'archaeological fiction' – that is the ability of historical fiction to probe new areas and carry within the fiction potential truths or insights into the past. Renault is perhaps a good example of this, as she brought the homosexuality of characters such as Alexander the Great as a defining feature of the character and his world. In this case she was ahead of her time, and certainly of the portrayal of the Classical World, where for many reasons Greek homosexuality was overlooked or glossed over by explorations of the period. To return to a quotation from Chapter One (p.197), the historical novel provides 'a background, a setting, in a context' and helps to coerce and entreat such facts, inconvenient and possibly hidden, into utterance' (Fletcher, 2002, p.6).

So far I have mainly focussed on the insights I gained into the writing of *Viking Fire*, but to finish, it is worth looking forward. The critical thesis has transformed the way that I am approaching the next novel in this series. By understanding the impulse inspired by the historical sublime I am much better aware of how I am interacting with the historical record, in all its imperfections. Having clear demarcations between the authentic reworking of history, and the purely fanciful treatment of the past, sets out clearly for me the areas within which my creative impulses can work. Rigney's exploration of the imperfection of historical narratives has also given me a greater sense of confidence and mastery over the material that I am hoping to rework.

## Reflections and Conclusions

In Chapter One I set out the initial goals for the series of novels of which *Viking Fire* is a part, and also this specific novel. In doing this I started by setting out what I considered should be a better understanding of 1066, an event which is both symbolic of national mythologies and also of hindsight bias. I have also set out the source material for Harald Hardrada's life, and examined the reliability of these sources, with special reference to Snorri, and his criteria for assessing evidence which he included in *Heimskringla*, which, in many ways, remain applicable. But I have also illustrated my method, and shown how texts, such as the *Heliand*, offer possible insights into the period in which Norwegians were being Christianised, and insights into what exactly people of this period believed or understood about their religion. And, of course, by setting out the sources, I am also defining the areas of historical sublime which the novel itself responds to.

In Chapter 2 I examined the main models for understanding the historical novel and historiographical narratives, namely those of Lukács and White. While they provide a good starting point for understanding the historical novel I have also examined a selection of important literary-critical modelling of the historical novel, and how they have developed the earlier theories, and also how they have linked Scott's historical novel to the feminine and romantic tradition. Of particular note is Rigney's theory of the imperfection of historical narratives, and her concept of the historical sublime, which, as explained above, offers an explanation of why we find history so compelling, and also reveals the creative space for the historical novelist. Also important is the way that the historical novel and history as a discipline influenced each other, with some historians, such as Ranke, reacting against Scott's methodology, while others, such as Thomas Macaulay aspired to the same mimetic quality of Scott's version of the past, a quality which continues to inspire historians, as the introduction to Winroth (2014, p.1) shows.

In Chapter 3 there has been a selective analytical engagement with five historical novels ranging from Scott to Mantel, and allowing me to trace, selectively, some of the literary-historical developments of the historical novel from its origins with Scott, through the nineteenth century, as exemplified by Edward Bulwer-Lytton and William Morris, and then into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as epitomised by Mary Renault and Hilary Mantel. I have examined how the selected historical novelists have presented the way in which they tried to bring historical verisimilitude into their work, and how they

characterise the research that has gone into their work, and then by extension, the authenticity they are claiming for it.

In Chapter 4 I have chronicled at length the process of writing *Viking Fire*, with emphasis on the positioning of the novel, the research that went into it, some of the choices I have made and the way I picked the appropriate language for the novel. I have ended by also going on to consider how this critical thesis has influenced both this novel, and my understanding of my craft as a whole. The thesis has also highlighted the principal themes that I have developed whilst working on this novel, and which I have referred to above in Chapters 2 and 3. One theme is that the historical novel is not a revolutionary innovation, but is part of a longer tradition of historical narratives whose purpose it is to answer an audience's shifting desire for historical detail by blending fact and fiction into a compelling and authentic narrative. Beyond that literary-historical argument about the past, I have argued that the historical novel has an archaeological ability to excavate the sublime areas of the past, and to offer possibilities in fiction that might not only expand but also enhance our understanding of the past. Through 'rigour, integrity, unsparing devotion and...scepticism' (*The Day is for the Living*, 2017, p.7) fiction has the license to investigate these areas, in a way that history cannot. And it adds to the mimetic value of history, changing the way the audience responds to the past. As Mantel writes:

History, and science too, help us put our small lives in context. But if we want to meet the dead looking alive, we turn to art (*The Day is for the Living*, 2017, p.2)

And, as Dutton demonstrates (2010, p. 114-5), it is through art that some of the most profound impressions of the past are conveyed, returning to the essential paradox of historical fiction, that it is 'a fictional form that does the work of history' (Mayer, 1997, p. 16). My own novels, past as well as future, are now committed to this rich, fraught literary tradition of showing how the present might have been different.

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