

Beverley Southgate: “Why Dryasdust? Historians in Fiction”.

Dryasdust is the archetypal literary representation of an historian – a tediously pedantic scholar who, as Walter Scott describes in the Dedicatory Epistle to *Ivanhoe* (1819), gleans material from ‘the dust of antiquity’, and utilises ‘musty records..., the authors of which seem perversely to have conspired to suppress... all interesting details’. That negative assessment is confirmed by both unorthodox historians and novelists through the nineteenth and even twentieth centuries; so after looking at some further examples, I shall address the question of why such a distressing view of history and historians should have prevailed for so long.

Fictional representations of history and historians

Scott was not the only historian who rebelled against the orthodoxies of his own discipline. Thomas Carlyle too adopted the model of Dryasdust as an ideal opponent, referring in a similar manner in 1845 to ‘dreary old records’, which convey no living voice from the past, but rather ‘a widespread inarticulate slumberous mumblement, issuing as if from the lake of eternal Sleep’. ‘Alas’, as he laments elsewhere, ‘what mountains of dead ashes, wreck and burnt bones, does assiduous Pedantry dig up from the Past Time, and name it History!’¹ Henry Thomas Buckle likewise complained in 1861 about how ‘the vast majority of historians fill their works with the most trifling and miserable details’ – including, worst of all, ‘long accounts of [military] campaigns, battles and sieges’, which were, no doubt, all ‘very interesting to those engaged in them, but to us *utterly useless*’.² And Jacob Burckhardt too famously described contemporary scholars in similarly negative terms, as digging a hole in the mountain of history, creating ‘a pile of rubble and rubbish behind themselves’, and then dying.³

In their critique of a Dryasdust approach, historians were joined by such philosophers as Nietzsche and Herbert Spencer, both of whom criticised the pedantry and irrelevant

¹ Thomas Carlyle, *Elucidations*, in *The Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, ed. S. C. Lomas, 3 vols; London, Methuen, 1904, vol. 1, pp. 2-3; *Past and Present* [1834], London, Ward, Lock, n.d., p. 36.

² Thomas Henry Buckle, *History of Civilization in England*, quoted by Robert M. Burns and Hugh Rayment-Pickard (eds), *Philosophies of History*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2000, p. 128 (my emphasis).

³ Jacob Burckhardt, quoted by Frank Ankersmit in Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan, and Alun Munslow (eds), *Manifestos*, London, Routledge, 2007, p. 179.

concerns of historians in the 1870s; but it was writers of fiction – novelists and dramatists – who probably conveyed such attitudes to the widest public. Best known is George Eliot in *Middlemarch* (1871-2), with Mr. Casaubon represented as a meticulous scholar, who burrows away in the archives for many years making his notes, but who finds it hard ever to draw his researches to any sort of conclusion or to offer any practical justification for them. His empirical procedures, as he endlessly collects his data, may be impeccable, but they come at the cost of any imaginative input – either into his work or into his personal life; so he appears as a sad figure who, on honeymoon in Rome, abandons his younger wife Dorothea while continuing his (to him) essential research in the Vatican archives. It may be a more general occupational hazard for historians, but Casaubon himself comes to recognize that he lives ‘too much with the dead’.⁴

A further deeply unflattering representation of an academic historian is Ibsen’s character Jørgen Tesman in *Hedda Gabler* (1890). Tesman – another ‘indefatigable researcher’ – is shown similarly as having just returned from a honeymoon which had been, for him, ‘a kind of research tour... with all those old records I had to hunt through’, while his glamorous wife Hedda meanwhile had been ‘excruciatingly bored’.⁵ Tesman’s research topic was ‘domestic crafts in Brabant in the Middle Ages’ – a subject as esoteric as that of Jim Dixon, Kingsley Amis’s representative historian in *Lucky Jim* in the mid-twentieth century, with his article on ‘The Economic Influence of the Developments in Shipbuilding Techniques, 1450-1485’. Dixon is shown as conscious of his own work’s ‘niggling mindlessness, its funereal parade of yawning enforcing facts, the pseudo-light it threw upon non-problems’ – of how in short it may have contributed to a perception of the historical discipline as, in his friend’s words, nothing better than ‘a racket’.⁶

While recognising the smallness of my sample, then, it does seem that fictional representations of conventional historians, from the nineteenth and through the twentieth centuries, serve to confirm a reputation as ‘Dryasdusts’. In other cases, where they do assume more positive characteristics, historians are shown as themselves rebelling against the orthodoxies of their own profession, one early example being Michel in André Gide’s *The Immoralist* (1902). Michel describes how, before experiencing an epiphany which led him to

⁴ George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, London, Oxford University Press, 1947, p. 12.

⁵ Henrik Ibsen, *Hedda Gabler* (1890), in *Three Plays*, transl. Una Ellis-Fermor, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1950, pp. 300, 268, 298.

⁶ Kingsley Amis, *Lucky Jim* [1954], London, Penguin, 1961, pp. 14, 33.

renounce history as conventionally practised, he used to take pleasure in the ‘very fixity [of the past], which enabled my mind to work with precision; the facts of history all appeared to me like specimens in a museum, or rather like plants in a herbarium, permanently dried’. That ‘immobility’, that ‘terrifying fixity’, is what makes the historian’s work easier, or even possible; it is just *there*, as a proper object of his study. But for Michel’s reformed self, it has come to constitute ‘the immobility of death’, a way of looking at the past which makes it all too ‘easy to forget they [those specimen ‘facts’] had once upon a time been juicy with sap and alive in the sun’.⁷

Some half-century later, Wyndham Lewis, in his semi-autobiographical novel *Self Condemned*, showed another Professor of History – in this case so disillusioned with his subject that he felt obliged to resign. What particularly distressed Professor Harding was that historians accepted their own exclusion from any confrontation of issues that were contemporary or of practical importance. As a result, history had become ‘as harmless a thing as could well be imagined’ – an anodyne theoretical construction of no practical consequence, and simply concerned with the recital of such banalities as ‘William the Conqueror 1066 and a list of the wives of Henry VIII’.⁸ Lewis was influenced here by R. G. Collingwood⁹, who referred to ‘that putrefying corpse of historical thought, the “information” to be found in text-books’, and who similarly assessed his own discipline of moral philosophy as being so pure from the sordid taint of utility that they [practitioners] could lay their hands on their hearts and say it was *no use at all*.¹⁰

That uselessness was particularly regrettable when major practical problems were impending – in Professor Harding’s case, a second world war.¹¹ By confining their attention to what was well and truly past, he believed, historians excluded from their purview any real analysis of recent events: that had the advantage of confirming the discipline’s autonomy and

⁷ André Gide, *The Immoralist* [1902], transl. Dorothy Bussy, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1960, pp. 49-50. Here Gide sounds not unlike Carlyle with his insistence that the past was ‘actually filled with living men, not by protocols, state papers, controversies and abstractions’: quoted by J. R. Hale (ed.), *The Evolution of British Historiography*, London, Macmillan, 1967, p. 36.

⁸ Wyndham Lewis, *Self Condemned* [1954], Santa Barbara, Black Sparrow Press, 1983, p. 118.

⁹ Collingwood’s thought was certainly known to Lewis, who actually quotes from what he refers to as ‘an unpublished MS’ – a manuscript that later took form as *The Idea of History* [1946], Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1961. See pp. 77-8, and cp. *Self Condemned*, pp. 92-3.

¹⁰ R. G. Collingwood, *Autobiography* [1939], Penguin, 1944, pp. 36-8 (my emphases).

¹¹ It is noteworthy that Wyndham Lewis had fought in the First World War: see his account in a collection of autobiographical essays, *Blasting and Bombadeering* [1937], London, John Calder, 1982.

freedom from political involvement, but it had the disadvantage of enabling men to continue ‘proudly unrolling the blood-stained and idiotic record of their past’ without proper scrutiny; so that it was possible to report preparations for yet another war ‘as if it were an international football match which was being staged in an unusually elaborate manner’.¹²

Feeling unable to profess such a subject, Professor Harding resigns; and so too, effectively, does Graham Swift’s fictional teacher Tom Crick in *Waterland* (1983), for similar reasons. He too becomes aware that his own history lessons have constituted little more than ‘spooned-down doses of the past’; and abandoning conventional methodology, with its aspiration to arrive at ‘truth’, he takes up telling stories about the past – stories in which he mixes personal and public, fact with fiction. For history, he comes to believe, is nothing more than ‘a way of coming up with just another story’ for people who need the comfort of a meaningful narrative in which to inscribe themselves; history is just a ‘fabrication’, a ‘diversion’, a ‘reality obscuring drama’.¹³

That apparently negative assessment unsurprisingly fails to win support from Crick’s Headmaster, who closes his Department down; and his case does serve to confirm the conclusion, derived again admittedly from a very limited sample, that it is not such renegades but orthodox historians whom novelists have tended to represent in a negative light – as ‘Dryasdusts’ burrowing away in the archives and professing a subject of no practical use or relevance. Historians are approved only when, like Gide’s Michel, Lewis’s Professor Harding, and Swift’s Tom Crick, they repudiate the constraints of their own discipline. So:

How did that negative perception take hold?

From the origins of written literature in classical Greece, and Aristotle’s authoritative discrimination of the various genres, there has been competition, sometimes friendly, sometimes fierce, between history and fiction (where ‘fiction’ is to be taken as embracing not only novels – which would be anachronistic – but works of the ‘imagination’, including poetry). Even Thucydides was critical of his more imaginative predecessors, Homer and Herodotus, but the breach between history and imaginative literature became deepest and at its most acrimonious after the former’s redefinition as a modern ‘science’ in the nineteenth century. For ‘science’, with its ideal of ‘mechanical’ explanations based on the detached study

¹² Lewis, *Self Condemned*, pp. 93, 43.

¹³ Graham Swift, *Waterland* [1983], London, Picador, 1992, pp. 60, 263, 40.

of empirical facts, seemed to deny the validity of just those qualities and characteristics that are most prized in the humanities, including the expression of subjective experience, imagination, feeling, and a sense of wonder.

It is with that scientific model that historians consciously aligned themselves, as they sought disciplinary respectability through following what seemed, in Charles Kingsley's prescient words, 'likely to be queen of all the fairies for many a year to come'.¹⁴ But one implication of adopting scientific procedures was – as noted for instance by Herder¹⁵ – a separation of head from heart; and that showed up the inevitable incompatibility between historians' reconstituted selves on the one hand and purveyors of fiction on the other.

As early as 1854, then, Charles Dickens in *Hard Times* describes the mechanistically minded Thomas Gradgrind – 'a man of *realities*' – as requiring of school pupils 'nothing but Facts', together with a corresponding repudiation of any 'fancy' or imagination or sense of wonder; and it is quite clear where Dickens' own sympathies lie.¹⁶ And that his account of contemporary intellectual trends is not entirely fanciful is indicated by the fictional Gradgrind's actual parallel in the person of James Mill – a man who similarly regarded emotions 'as a form of madness', and whose educational practice (in a delightful understatement) 'tended to the undervaluing of feeling'. That left his son John Stuart suffering an emotional breakdown from which he only recovered by a reading of Wordsworth's poetry, from which, as he himself later explains, he came to realize that 'there is a wisdom of the Heart' as well as 'a wisdom of the Head'.¹⁷

It has, though, been the wisdom of the head that has, from the nineteenth and through the twentieth centuries, been seen as the proper domain of history: the heart may have its reasons, but they belong elsewhere. Ranke himself is described as having kept to himself any 'feelings and sensations, [as] being purely personal things'; and in Mandell Creighton's work, as we are warned by Lytton Strachey, 'every suggestion of personal passion has been studiously removed' – appropriately enough for one who advocated the pursuit of history 'in a calm and scientific spirit'. And if the result in the former case is that

¹⁴ Charles Kingsley, *The Water Babies* [1863], London and Glasgow, Blackie, n.d., p. 54.

¹⁵ Noting the ubiquity of mechanistic explanations, Herder wrote of how 'The head and the heart are completely separated'. Quoted in Burns and Rayment-Pickard (eds), *Philosophies of History*, pp. 75-6.

¹⁶ Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* [1854], ed. David Craig, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1969, pp. 47-8 (my emphasis), and *passim*.

¹⁷ John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography* [1873], London, Oxford University Press, 1924, p. 41, 93, 245-6.

Ranke's history is 'not history lived', and in the latter that 'a perfectly grey light prevails everywhere', then that leaves a vacancy which can be filled by those less concerned with 'factual' truth. Or as Macaulay early noted, history may have ideally been a compound of head and heart, reason and imagination, philosophy and poetry, but those components had become 'completely and professionally separated': for him, the one was exemplified by Henry Hallam, who (as shown in his *Constitutional History of England* in 1828) had obtained 'almost complete mastery' over his feelings, enabling 'unsparing impartiality'; whereas the other – portrayal of the 'reality of human flesh and blood' – had been, after rejection by historians, appropriated by historical novelists.¹⁸

That disciplinary distinction was maintained through the twentieth century, when historians tended to look down on writers of fiction as a lesser breed, dealing as they did with matters that could not be empirically validated or objectively assessed. Arthur Marwick, for example, was emphatic that what differentiated historians from writers of fiction was their special effort 'to separate out *unambiguously* what is *securely established* from what is basically *speculation*';¹⁹ where the implication of the historian's superiority is clear. In that context of divisiveness, it is hardly surprising that novelists should have resented the supposedly inferior position in which they had been placed; and hardly surprising that they should have continued to take it out on conventional historians in what were, after all, only semi-fictional representations.

Conclusion

There are some indications now in the early twenty-first century that a change of heart – and even head – may now be under way. In Penelope Lively's novel *Moon Tiger* (1987), the central narrating character is Claudia Hampton – a writer of what, as she diffidently explains, 'I suppose you'd call history'. But she is careful to explain that that does not imply that she in any way resembles 'that dried up bone of a woman' who had taught her mediaeval history at Oxford; for she herself, on the contrary, repudiates 'the cool level tone of dispassionate

¹⁸ For Count Yorck's assessment of Ranke, see Wolf Lepenies, *Between Literature and Science: the Rise of Sociology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988, pp. 253-4; on Mandell Creighton, see Lytton Strachey, *Portraits in Miniature and Other Essays*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1933, pp. 208-9; Macaulay, Review of Hallam's *Constitutional History of England*, in A. J. Grieve (ed.), *Critical and Historical Essays*, 2 vols; London, Dent, 1907, vol. 1, pp. 1-4, 55.

¹⁹ Arthur Marwick, *The New Nature of History: Knowledge, Evidence, Language*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2001, pp. 215 (my emphases), 82.

narration' considered appropriate for the 'grey stuff' of history. And as she reveals her own philosophy of history, it seems to resemble, and in part anticipate, contemporary trends – pointing perhaps to a reformed historiography for the future. She recommends, for example, the replacement of linear narrative by a 'kaleidoscopic' model for chronology; she offers a critique of narratives with patterns supposedly found ready made in (rather than imposed upon) the past; she determines to 'use many voices, in this history' – and, with an ironic glance at the fragmentation of more recent historiography, indicates that she might even tell that history 'from the point of view of the soup, maybe'; and although 'loftily disdained by some academics', she actually 'persuades the general public to read history' – far more so (as she claims) than the professionals.²⁰

In that fictional representation, Penelope Lively can be seen as in some respects anticipating the direction that history, both in theory and in practice, may now be taking – leading towards a redefinition of the subject that embraces heart as well as head, feeling as well as reason, colour as well as grey (or black and white); so that historians themselves may yet come to be perceived and represented as something more than dryasdust.

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²⁰ Penelope Lively, *Moon Tiger*, London, Penguin, 1988, pp. 2 - 3, 8, 59, 103, 152, 186.