The President's Column

The recent dramatisation of Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* into a very successful television series, poses questions about the relationship between the past, fiction and the dramatisation of the those perspectives on history. There has always been a powerful relationship between 'history' and fiction, and the imagination. My own thoughts on the issue were made more evident recently as a result of the reading and thinking undertaken for a short BBC radio programme (see www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0507lhd) on Francis Bacon's use of ancient Greek myths to explore ideas of natural philosophy: in particular the myth of Daedalus, the inventor of the Labyrinth and the scientist behind the breeding of the monstrous minotaur. Bacon used these myths to dramatise both the creativity of science, but also its potential dangers. As well as reading many articles in the learned journals (as you would expect no less), I also returned to my battered copy of Roger Lancelyn Green's *Tales of the Greek Heroes* (1958). This reading prompted thoughts about the power of narrative and literary expression in the successful and proper representation of the past. Many modern research works, whether in the learned journals or in distinguished monographs, are not driven by literary elegance but by the marshalling and display of archival erudition, and as a consequence have a very narrow band of readership and influence outside university audiences.

The role that the imagination plays in the development of a love for, and interest in, history is indisputable, especially among the young. It may be more common for that encounter to take place on the screen rather than initially in book form. The recent blockbuster series *The Game of Thrones* has inspired much speculation about it being modelled on medieval English history and conflict: the TV series has now been matched by consumption of the novels, and associated 'historical' handbooks where the author has imaginatively 'filled in' the details of an historical context. These audiences are interested and intelligent – looking for parallels with 'real' histories, offering comparative interpretations, and speculating about the future.

There have been some remarkable works of historical fiction in recent years, works of literature which explicitly aim to make a point about how history is a written discourse. One powerful example is William Boyd's *Any Human Heart* (2002) purportedly drawn from the journals of Logan Mountstuart (1906-1991). Of course all of the contents are imaginative fiction, but Mountstuart, a literary figure, crosses paths with many of the elite political and cultural figures of the twentieth century. Like 'real' historical sources, the diary has dead ends, unexplained elements, and missing relationships. If, in the future, all of Boyd's involvement in the work was obliterated, and we were simply left with the text, it might be very difficult for the historian to dispute the authenticity of the diaries. Boyd, no doubt, was making literary points about the nature of biography, autobiography and the 'random' nature of life in distinction from the need to create narratives for history. Certainly when I finished reading the book for the first time, I did think I had encountered a 'real person' even if it was one built from lots of different lives. Notoriously, Boyd duped the art world by inventing an entirely fictional artist Nat Tate (1928-1960), holding an exhibition and launching a fake

biography of his subject on the evening before April Fools' Day, 1998.

Ruth Scurr's remarkable new work, *John Aubrey: my own life* (Chatto and Windus, 2015) takes the literary invention of the life of a real historical figure a stage further with her reimagining and reconfiguration of the archives and papers of the antiquarian John Aubrey (1626-97). Famous for the composition of his own ***Brief Lives*** which captured the biographies of many contemporaries, as well as works on astrology, Stonehenge and folklore, Aubrey's archives, mainly in Oxford, are vast. A new forthcoming edition of his major work will run to nearly a thousand densely annotated pages. Scurr has employed her literary alchemy to produce something approximating to a diary culled, extracted and woven together from the sources. I know this material well, and in the best sense of the words, can see where the seams have been woven in some cases. Nevertheless this is a superb piece of history: we encounter Aubrey's anxieties, his friends, his ambitions, his doubts and illnesses. For anyone wanting to enter into the turbulence of the seventeenth century – the contested politics, the discovery of natural philosophy, the persistence of magic and the imminent dangers to health from medical incompetence or the violence of men, this is without doubt the place to start.

As historians we sometimes tend to side-step the question of literary presentation and style (much to the horror and discomfort of readers), but producing history that entertains as well as informs should be part of the ambition of the public historian. Henry Treece, the children's historical novelist, when pondering the business of writing his novels, noted that the 'act of writing a novel is, for me, the slow, and lonely, and infinitely tiring process of finding how to make magic happen. One can learn it up to a point but, once this learning reaches a certain stage one becomes automatic, a conjuror, and the thing one creates lacks organic life. It lies stark on the page, has no warmth, no dimension, no capability of moving me when I think about it again.' Substituting 'writing history' for 'writing a novel' gives a sense of the role imaginative writing might and should (?) play in the composition of history.

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