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Restoration: fact and fiction in the stores of history

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Sir Walter Scott, masquerading both as ?The Author?, as well as his pompous alter-ego, the historian ?Dr Jonas Dryasdust?, inserted the following dialogue into the beginning of his historical novel of the Restoration period, *Peveril of the Peak* (1823):

> ?Author?you mean to say these learned persons [historians] will have but little toleration for a romance, or a fictious narrative, founded upon history?
>
> Dryasdust: Why sir, I do rather apprehend, that their respect for the foundation will be such, that they may be apt to quarrel with the inconsistent nature of the superstructure; just as every classical traveller pours forth expressions of sorrow and indignation when, in travelling through Greece, he chances to see a Turkish kiosk rising on the ruins of an ancient temple ?? (1)

Comparisons between historical fiction and historical work of fact have become much more frequent since Scott?s day, but the basis of the argument often seems the same. The presence of any number of novelistic ?Turkish kiosks? erected in full view of not a few historian?s own grounds and filled with ?frothy and superficial knowledge? has been often criticised for at the least foolishly spoiling the historical view, and at worst for looking in completely the wrong historical direction; that is, of course, where they have not been ignored entirely.(2) The two sides seem destined to live, if not at war, then at least in state of mutual antipathy. Nevertheless the historical novel was just as much a development of the 19th century as serious academic history and both of these genres have, arguably, come to their full flowering in the modern era.(3) Yet the Dryasdust distain for the historical novel still lingers on in some quarters. Can historians still afford to ignore the historical novel completely? Can it really tell us anything about our views of a particular period?

If such literary works tend to be treated at all by historians, then it is often as a somewhat smaller, less worthy, over-rowdy, and much more emotional younger brother, over-concerned with mere story and (taken as given by many historians) often containing many an ill-conceived, ahistorical, character creation. Far better, it is thought, to till the historical soil in our primary sources, so as to capture the genuine essence of the factual past and only then display the results in serious academic tomes and in serious academic language. Yet both genres possibly still have much to learn from one another. Indeed if popular and just occasionally academic history has become more novelistic in tone at times, then sometimes historical novels have become more academically serious.(4)

The idea of the Restoration period has been present in the historical novel genre for some time. It has never, of course, been the most popular of periods for the historical novelist to explore -inevitably that palm lies with the all-powerful Tudors, who alongside Romans and Nazis seemingly dominate the popular historical imagination of students of all ages in all forms of the media. Having said this, there are some interesting examples of the genre of Restoration historical novels in existence. Indeed the use of the Restoration period as a vehicle for the novel has something of a history of its own that can still give us some perspective when examining one particular example of the genre in the context of a new and serious academic work on the period.

The ?founder? of the historical novel, Sir Walter Scott, actually set the ball rolling on the Restoration novel by setting one of his more unreadable than usual books in the period. This was the aforementioned *Peveril of the Peak*, wherein Scott crashed about the period with improbable settings and even more improbable characters and their unlikely dialogue, doing unhistorical things in a singularly ponderous manner. Others soon followed his lead.

Rose Tremain?s novel *Restoration* is not Scott by any means; it is very readable for one thing, has engaging characters and is not that improbable in its story.(5) Nor is it a pot-boiler or bodice-ripper romance *a la* Kathleen Winsor?s *Forever Amber* (1944). Instead it is really a novel about ideas, which happens to be set in the past, and it can lead us to ponder and then go on to explore many of these ideas in a genuine historical

context, which is perhaps what the really good historical novel should do.(6) Space naturally precludes an examination of all of the ideas in this particular work. The novel covers many historical themes, from Nonconformity in the character of Pearce, through the issue of gender, to ideas of madness and of science. Clearly the suggestion of the very idea of the Restoration as aspirational is crucial to the novel. Robert Merivel, the main protagonist, who has more than a touch of Samuel Pepys about him, aspires, after his Candide-like adventures, to a restoration of his soul. A further theme, the idea of a historical burn-line in 1660, presents the somewhat old-fashioned view that everything changed in May 1660 and nothing was ever the same again.

Tremain?s view on this particular point is made clear through her main character?s statement that: ?The truth is that when the King restored, it was as if self-discipline and drudgery had exploded in clap of laughter. I became much too excited by and greedy for life to spend much of it at work. Women were cheaper than claret, so I drank women? (p. 9). This is the idea of the 1660s as the 1960s, or at least as the 1980s when the novel was written: metaphorical and sometimes actual, wealth, sun, licentiousness and sex; but, of course, if the 1960s and 1980s wasn?t really like the proverbial and mythical 1960s or 1980s, neither was the 1660s like the mythical 1660s.

Intriguingly, though, in this novel, as in other Restoration novels, one of the real centres of gravity in the work lies in the character of a real person: Charles II. The invented characters, interesting though they are, move around a King whose own restoration is the political act in the title. It is also implied that it has botched and unsatisfactory results, even for him. While Charles II is off stage for much of the novel, there is little doubt that it is his character, or Tremain?s view of his character, that really dominates the work. He is the novel?s *deus ex machina*. Why is there such a fascination with this particular monarch? For it might be said that that one of the main characteristics of most Restoration-period novels is that they always tend to be dominated by Charles II whatever their plot, just as the Tudor historical novel is dominated by Henry VIII or Elizabeth I.

Of course, we know, or believe that we know, where we are with Charles II. He is, so any number of authors have told us, a `personality?.(7) In popular culture Charles II remains a hale fellow well met sort of man, one of us really, sometimes a sort of early Blairite ?pretty straight sort of guy?, with, for a king, the ?common touch?. He was naturally a man with faults, but was also a lover of wine, women, dogs, song and pleasure and who could dislike such a man as that? He was also a supporter of the theatre and it might be said that in Restoration comedy is to be found a form of drama which the King?s personal life sometimes resembled. So, if Charles II has been frequently depicted in the modern era as a generally all-round good fellow, as well as occasionally a shrewd reader of men, as in ?Restoration?, we feel we ought to like him and, we are perhaps meant to feel he would probably like us. It might be said, however, that this image is arguably a hangover of the Charles II of the Arthur Bryant School of history. While the real Charles II actually was some of these things, and even at the time he was portrayed as some of these things, he was also a lot more than this, as historians have tried to explain. He was actually a complex and intelligent man living in a post-revolutionary political and cultural environment and above all a survivor, not merely the caricature Nell Gwyn-chasing ?merry monarch?. However, for the real Charles and his political space we must always turn to the historian?s view, which is where Matthew Jenkinson?s serious and genuinely weighty work of history can help us.

?For the King moves like God in our world, like Faith itself. He is a fount of beauty and power, of which we all yearn, in our overheated hearts, to feel some cooling touch? notes Robert Merivel in the novel (p. 24). Jenkinson takes a similar view of the Caroline Court, its culture and its monarch. The court, a space Merivel continually aspires to, finds a minor place in and then is catastrophically cast out from, is vitally important to Jenkinson?s work too. Merivel finds by the end of the book that the court was not worth that much anyway and fortunately for him he is eventually given his own space to inhabit, but few of those who aspired to the court at the time would have thought like this and they were eager to be there whatever the consequences for themselves. In Jenkinson?s work the Restoration court image matches this significant historical nexus. For Jenkinson?s is a sober view of this important institution, its inhabitants and its culture, and much more penetrating than Merivel?s.

For Jenkinson the central idea is of a court culture that is informed by and influenced by politics and in which politics also influences culture and the nation. It is indeed the presentation of the king and his image within the contemporary multiple voices of culture. The book is located around a Restoration court that was politicized in its many forms including its artefacts. The court contained ideas on kingship, on performance, on faction and on contemporary disagreement, as well as the distrust of philosophies. It was also a problematic space. Following the failed republic, the court was part of a much needed political stabilisation in the period, but it was continually undercut by cultural interests that stressed negativity, advice and challenge. This was significant. For argues Jenkinson the ?order and health of the nation was reliant on, symptomatic of and a reflection of that of the royal court? (p. 213) Underneath the pleasurable veneer of the Restoration court therefore stood both severe uncertainty and a ?lively interrogation? of the issues of the court: ?virtue, love, loyalty, reason, authority and ? honour? had to be interrogated (p. 236) The monarch who compromised these political/cultural elements was Charles II. The King, by his indulgence of both himself and his courtiers, was in the end exactly what was not what was needed, for his reported actions only emphasised the fears of disorder in the realm; the same fears, of course, that are primary to understanding the early modern psyche.

Chapter two of the book goes on to explore the features of the court in the early Restoration, the first being a rhetorical commitment to the law as evinced by the executions of the regicides. Jenkinson then examines the role of churchmen at court and the role of the author John Crowne; he discusses the court wits in chapter five and John Dryden in chapter six as a court poet (though not in the sense that Rochester had been), alongside sections on Tory discontent at court, printed propaganda and the ?empty atmosphere? of the last days of the court of Charles II after the ?second Restoration? of the 1680s. It is a rich and finely detailed mix for the reader to interrogate and gives us a good understanding of the cultural ambience and the cultural ambivalences of the court. If the entire Restoration court experience has, it is argued, implications for the health of the body politic then indeed the ideas of ?words and meanings? of the courtiers and their king need to be deconstructed.

In many senses therefore the historical work parallels that of the novel; it too is about ideas. The court however has moved away from prurient interests in disorder and sexual libertinism that we find to some extent in the novel, into something more. The court was the central organisation of the new state in the 1660s, and if it was dysfunctional then so was the state itself. As Jenkinson puts it, the court should be viewed as ?a political institution to be taken seriously, whose vibrant cultural life could be used to navigate contemporary political complexities? (p. 7). Here then is the nub of the issue: for while the historical novel can in the end only ever deal with surface and story, the historical work can probe deeply into the heart of the court?s problems. Yet, for all of this there is still arguably room for both versions, for used wisely the one can provoke questions of the other. As Scott the author noted long ago:

?The stores of history are accessible to everyone; and are no more exhausted or impoverished by the hints thus borrowed from them, than the fountain is drained by the water which we subtract for domestic purposes. And in reply to the sober charge of falsehood, against a narrative announced positively to be fictitious, one can only answer by Prior?s exclamation

?Odzooks, must one swear to the truth of a song!?.(8)

Notes

1. Sir Walter Scott, *Peveril of the Peak* (2 vols., 1836 ed.), I, p.x?xi.Back to (1)
2. *ibid*.,I, p.xii.Back to (2)
3. See Jerome de Groot, *The Historical Novel* (Abingdon, 2010).Back to (3)
4. One example would be Hilary Mantel, *Wolf Hall* (London, 2009).Back to (4)
5. Having said this, as so often in historical fiction the timescale within this novel jars to the historian?s eye. The novel is set c.1660?7, but these years are telescoped and extended apparently to suit the plot. Back to (5)
6. Of course, in the end the novel is an entertainment and many reading it will be content with this pleasure alone.Back to (6)
7. Modern approaches, both academic and popular, to Charles II can be found in R. Hutton, *Charles II: King of England, Scotland and Ireland* (Oxford, 1989); R. Hutton*Debates in Stuart History* (Basingstoke, 2004), pp.132-170; T. Harris, *Restoration: Charles II and His Kingdoms, 1660-1685* (St Ives, 2005); A. Keay, *The Magnificent Monarch: Charles II and the Ceremonies of Power*(London, 2008) and Jenny Uglow, *A Gambling Man: Charles II and the Restoration* (London, 2009).Back to (7)
8. *Peveril*, I, p.xii.Back to (8)

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