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Tales of Other Times: A Survey of British Historical Fiction 1770-1812

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TALES OF OTHER TIMES

A Survey of British Historical Fiction, 1770–1812



Anne Stevens

The years 1760–1820 mark a turning point in the history of historiography. Methods for studying the past changed rapidly during this period, as did the forms in which historical knowledge was displayed. Hume famously called these years ‘the historical age’, while Foucault’s *Order of Things* contends that an epistemic shift from ‘order’ to ‘history’ took place around the year 1800. [1] The historical novel, possibly the most important generic innovation of Romantic-era fiction, is also the most important and underexplored historiographic innovation of these years. Its importance has not often been recognised, however, since, following the nineteenth-century establishment of an autonomous realm of art and the professionalisation of historiography, history and fiction came to appear more and more distinct and their earlier connections forgotten. The novel has come to be studied as a linguistically complex work of the imagination, using the techniques of close reading to uncover its hidden meanings, while works of historiography have more often been studied for the ideas they express than their means of expression.

The best recent book on eighteenth-century historiography, Mark Phillips’s *Society and Sentiment*, examines an expanded set of historiographic genres, including memoirs, biography, and ‘fragmentary’ histories (of art, commerce, women, and so on) to discuss developments in historiography over the period 1740 to 1820. The changes Phillips describes within historiography are precisely those areas where historical fiction excels—in the creation of narrative identification, the exploration of social history, and the depiction of domestic spaces and everyday life. [2] This paper seeks to complement the work of Phillips and others by reading the Romantic-era historical novel as an important and often overlooked historiographic genre.

By annexing the subject matter and some of the methods of historians, novelists participated in one of the most important generic rivalries of the eighteenth century. Historical works were produced in far greater numbers (10,000 historiographic works in contrast to 3,000 novels in the eighteenth century) and had far more prestige than the novel. Following the popular and critical successes of David Hume, William Robertson, and Edward Gibbon, novelists attempted to appropriate the prestige and popularity of historiography by encroaching upon its subject matter and techniques. In the process, however, they created an entirely new form of historical representation, one that played with new ideals of historical objectivity and new extremes of historical scepticism.

Most historians of the historical novel can be placed into one of two camps. The first of these camps has defined the features of genre by the Waverley Novels of Sir Walter Scott (published 1814–32) at the expense of previous incarnations of the form. These critics, such as Herbert Butterfield, Avrom Fleishman, Georg Lukács, and Harry Shaw, dismiss the historical fiction published before Scott as costume drama, Gothic romance, or ahistorical fantasy and begin their studies of the genre with *Waverley*. [3] The second camp, often comparativists, traces a much longer history for the historical novel. While Margaret Anne Doody extends the history of the historical novel to ancient Greek romance, Richard Maxwell and April Alliston have devoted considerable attention to seventeenth-century French examples of historical fiction. [4]

Katie Trumpener lays claim to a third position between the two extremes. [5] Historical fiction does not begin with Scott, she argues, but the historical novel of the Romantic period is notably different from and discontinuous with the historical fiction of the seventeenth

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century. Trumpener attributes this rupture to the influence of a new type of elegiac, nationalist antiquarianism, centred around the figure of the bard, which develops in Scotland and Ireland in response to the loss of political sovereignty. The focus of Trumpener's study, however, is the thematic issue of nationalism rather than the generic issue of historical fiction. Consequently, she does not limit her study to historical fiction but ranges freely among a variety of fictional and non-fictional forms, including national tales, Jacobin novels, and travel literature. Like Trumpener, I contend that historical fiction does not begin with Scott but that the features of the modern historical novel only begin to be elaborated in the second half of the eighteenth century. Rather than focusing on this shift as a political event, caused by an emergent sense of cultural nationalism, I have chosen to focus on its implications for the history of the production of knowledge.

Fictionalised representations of the past, of course, have classical antecedents in Homer and Heliodorus. For eighteenth-century novelists, the more immediate model for prose fiction set in a different historical epoch and featuring historical figures as characters would have been late seventeenth-century French works such as Madame de Lafayette's *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678) and the heroic romances of Madéleine de Scudéry (1601–67). In Britain, another type of 'historical novel' flourished in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, in the form of scandal fiction, or the 'secret histories' of the amours of historical figures. These works, often identified as 'historical novels' in their subtitles, were often translations of or influenced by the French *chronique scandaleuse*, a genre which began in 1660 with Bussy-Rabutin's *Histoire amoureuse des Gaules*. The most famous examples in English are Delarivier Manley's *Secret History of Queen Zarah* (1705) and *New Atalantis* (1709). [6]

These works were well out of fashion by the 1760s, when a new type of historical novel began to appear. Beginning with Thomas Leland's *Longsword, Earl of Salisbury* (1762) and popularised by Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), these new historical novels downplayed scandalous anecdotes of recent political figures in favour of 'tales of other times'. Dozens of historical fictions were published each year in the 1770s and 1780s. [7] The real explosion in historical fiction occurs during the 1790s, coinciding with the popularity of Gothic works by Ann Radcliffe and M. G. Lewis. Gothic novels, of course, are usually set in the past, but the use of 'Gothic' as a generic indicator of the supernatural was not fully established until the very end of the eighteenth century, following the popularity of Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* and the importation of the German *schauerroman*. Until that point, the word 'Gothic' as a generic tag meant a story set in the 'Gothic' period, or the Middle Ages. Among the novels that twentieth-century critics have lumped together as 'Gothic', a fairly distinct category of works can be isolated which are set in the past but lack supernatural machinery. These works tend to be set in England rather than on the Continent, and usually feature a mixture of historical and fictional characters, thus more closely resembling the historical novel than the Gothic in their modern senses.



While no single generic designation delineates all the historical novels of this period, many of these works possess subtitles that call attention to their claims to historicity. Since historiography was one of the novel's greatest competitors for the attention of the reading public, authors used the title pages of their works to call attention to the factuality of their content in a variety of ways:

- 'An Historical Tale' (Louis d'Ussieux, *The Siege of Aubigny*, 1782; Anne Fuller, *The Son of Ethelwolf*, 1789; Rosetta Ballin, *The Statue Room*, 1790; *Lady Jane Grey*, 1791)
- 'An Historic Tale' (*Gabrielle de Vergy*, 1790; *Edwy, son of Ethelred the Second*, 1791)
- 'A Tale, Founded on Historic Facts' (Anna Maria MacKenzie, *Monmouth*, 1790; Henry Siddons, *William Wallace: Or, the Highland Hero*, 1791)
- 'An Historical Tale, Founded on Facts' (Cassandra Cooke, *Battleridge*, 1799)
- 'A Tale, Founded upon Historic Truths' (*Somerset; or, the Dangers of Greatness*, 1792)

- 'A Tale of Other Times' (Sophia Lee, *The Recess*, 1783–85)
- 'An Old English Tale' (Martha Hugill, *St Bernard's Priory*, 1786)
- 'An Historical Romance' (*The Duke of Exeter*, 1789; *Arville Castle*, 1795; *Montford Castle; or the Knight of the White Rose*, 1795; John Broster, *The Castle of Beeston, or, Randolph Earl of Chester*, 1798)
- 'An Historical Novel' (*Eloisa de Clairville*, 1790; *The Siege of Belgrade*, 1791; Mrs E. M. Foster, *The Duke of Clarence*, 1795; *Charles Dacres: Or, the Voluntary Exile*, 1797; Mrs F. C. Patrick, *The Jesuit: or, the History of Anthony Babington, Esq.*, 1799)
- 'An Historic Novel' (Agnes Musgrave, *Cicely, or, the Rose of Raby*, 1795)
- 'Historic Tracts' (Anna Millikin, *Corfe Castle*, 1793)
- 'An Ancient Fragment' (*Edward de Courcy*, 1794)
- 'A British Story' (William Hutchinson, *The Hermitage*, 1772)
- 'A Fragment of Secret History' (Ann Yearsley, *The Royal Captives*, 1795)
- 'An Historic Fact' (Anna Maria Mackenzie, *Danish Massacre*, 1791)

Eighteenth-century subtitles helped to adumbrate the subject matter of a novel and to market it to a particular audience. [8] The subtitles above advertise the basis of the novels on real events (founded on facts, founded on historic facts, founded upon historic truths, and so forth) in an attempt to appeal to a reading public that was turning Hume and Gibbon into best-selling authors.

Turning to the contents of a few of these novels, then, we can see the ways in which Romantic-era historical fiction functioned as both a fictional and a historiographic genre. These novels repackaged the contents of historiography for a fiction-reading audience. At the same time, however, the novel did not merely borrow the prestige of historiography to lend credibility to a 'low' form of writing. By its very nature as a fictional narrative, the novel was uniquely equipped to accommodate certain new features of eighteenth-century historiography, such as the expanded range of topics for historical research, while simultaneously taking up features discarded from an increasingly scientific pursuit, such as invented speeches.



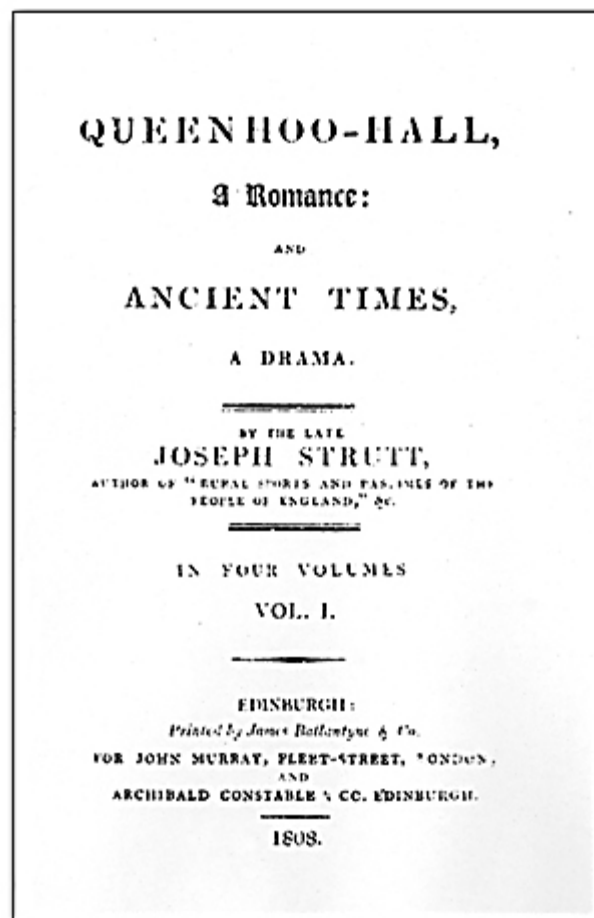
In repackaging the contents of historiography in fictional form, novelists aimed for an audience likely to be composed of more women, older children, and middle-rank readers, the patrons of the circulating libraries, than the more aristocratic male readers of antiquarian and specialised historical publications. [9] Gary Kelly has described a new type of didacticism in Romantic-era fiction, less interested in inculcating moral lessons than in providing useful knowledge through a fictional medium:

Children, like the common people (and perhaps women), were supposed to be irrational, incomplete as inward beings, and given to mere sociability. Hence narrative and fiction were supposed to be, unfortunately, necessary in order to secure their attention and interest. Nevertheless, fiction for the young would preferably include large amounts of factual, 'solid' information and be in a mode of formal realism, and set in common life. Where the historical or the geographical and social exotic were used they would be primarily for information and education. [10]

Kelly's characterisation of the structure of children's literature also describes the contents of Romantic-era historical fiction. In the preface to his novel *Queenhoo-Hall* (1808), the antiquary Joseph Strutt makes his intentions explicit: 'the chief purpose of the work, is to make it the *medium* of conveying much useful instruction, imperceptibly to the minds of such readers as are disgusted at the dryness usually concomitant with the labours of the antiquary'. [11]

Antiquaries such as Joseph Strutt worried about the ‘dryness’ of their historical writings, and turned to fiction as a way to package their materials for a popular audience. At the same time, historical novelists borrowed some of the more striking formal features of antiquarian publications to lend the appearance of authority to their volumes. These authors often take only the surface features of historiography—inserting unnecessarily pedantic footnotes or elaborate prefatory material—in an attempt to make their novels look like historiographic publications. Following the success of Walpole’s *Castle of Otranto*, these novels often use the convention of the discovered manuscript to introduce their work, even though the artificiality of the device is quickly apparent. Just as historical novelists drew upon the antiquarian interest in manuscripts, and prefaced their volumes as an antiquary would preface a paper to the Society, they also used the scholarly apparatus developed by antiquaries and antiquarian-influenced historians to frame their novels. Although only a handful of historical novelists used them, footnotes were a tool available to novelists who wished to display their learning, refer readers to other works, or just to make their prose appear more authoritative on the page. Historical novels with footnotes include *The Minstrel; or, Anecdotes of Distinguished Personages in the Fifteenth Century* (1793), Henrietta Rouviere Mosse’s *A Peep at our Ancestors: An Historical Romance* (1807), and Elizabeth Strutt’s *The Borderers* (1812).

Elizabeth Strutt, for example, calls attention to her footnotes: ‘Those obsolete customs and words which it was found necessary to introduce, in order to render the delineation of manners more perfect, are explained in notes at the end of the volumes, where may also be found such characteristic anecdotes as were deemed illustrative of that period of history with which they are connected.’ [12] The notes and illustrations place *The Borderers* within the battlegrounds of antiquarian controversy, suggesting that this work shares affinities with more serious works of historiography. Strutt’s preface further emphasises these affinities: ‘if they should excite in a single reader the wish to become more fully acquainted with one of the most brilliant epocha of English history, the labours of the authoress will not have been in vain’ (p. iv). Strutt showcases her historical sources in the footnotes, which include a number of antiquarian publications, such as the Society of Antiquaries of London’s journal *Archaeologia* (1770–), Walter Scott’s ballad collection *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802–03), the ballad collections of Joseph Ritson (1752–1803), the poems of Ossian, and Thomas Warton’s *History of English Poetry* (1774–89). Likewise, Mosse’s *Peep at our Ancestors* contains numerous footnotes explaining tangential historical details like the sailing abilities of the Normans, historical figures like Robert Duke of Normandy, and legal details like the establishment of the practice of trial by jury. In the footnotes, Mosse refers readers to antiquarian works such as Joseph Strutt’s *Customs and Manners* (1775–76) and Francis Grose’s *Antiquarian Repertory* (1775–84), situating her novel within a scholarly community.



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Several novelists supplement their display of erudition in the footnotes with prefatory statements of the labours that went into their compositions. In her preface, for example, Rouvière thanks the British Museum and the Herald's Office for allowing her access to their records. Anna Maria Porter's *Don Sebastian* (1809) goes further, listing the main sources for the novel and in the process illustrating her process of research and composition:

In my delineation of countries, manners, &c. I have endeavoured to give as faithful a picture as was possible to one who describes after the accounts of others; I consulted the voyages and tours of those days; so that the modern traveller, in journeying with me over Barbary, Persia, and Brazil, must recollect that he is beholding those countries as they appeared in the sixteenth century [...] The materials with which I have worked, have been drawn from general history, accounts of particular periods, the Harleian Miscellany, and a curious old tract published in 1602, containing the letters of Texere, De Castro, and others, with minute details of the conduct and sufferings of the mysterious personage concerning whom it treats. [13]

This account of her work serves a credentialising function for Porter. Just as antiquaries displayed their credentials through the initials 'F.S.A.' (Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries) on the title page, so Porter, unable to supply any scholarly initials, demonstrates that she has extensively read and researched her field, and is thus qualified to write a historical novel that makes some claim to historical accuracy.

While novelists experimented formally with the scholarly trappings of an increasingly 'scientific' historiography, thematic trends in the historical novel paralleled trends in eighteenth-century historiography. While it is impossible to generalise about the content of the eighteenth-century historical novel, certain topics were more popular than others. Just as historians' interest shifted from Greece and Rome to native English history and from antiquity to the Middle Ages, in the historical novel, medieval settings and English history predominate. The seventeenth-century heroic romances were frequently set in ancient Greece and Rome (see, for example, Scudéry's *Clélie*, 1654–60, and Charlotte Lennox's satiric treatment of it in *The Female Quixote*, 1752), while the bizarre *Memoirs of a Pythagorean* (1785), which surveys manners and customs in several ancient nations, is the exception rather than the rule by the last decades of the eighteenth century. [14] Instead, the historical novels of this period are usually set in Europe, most often England, and in temporal settings ranging from Anglo-Saxon times to the 'recent past' of the eighteenth century. [15]

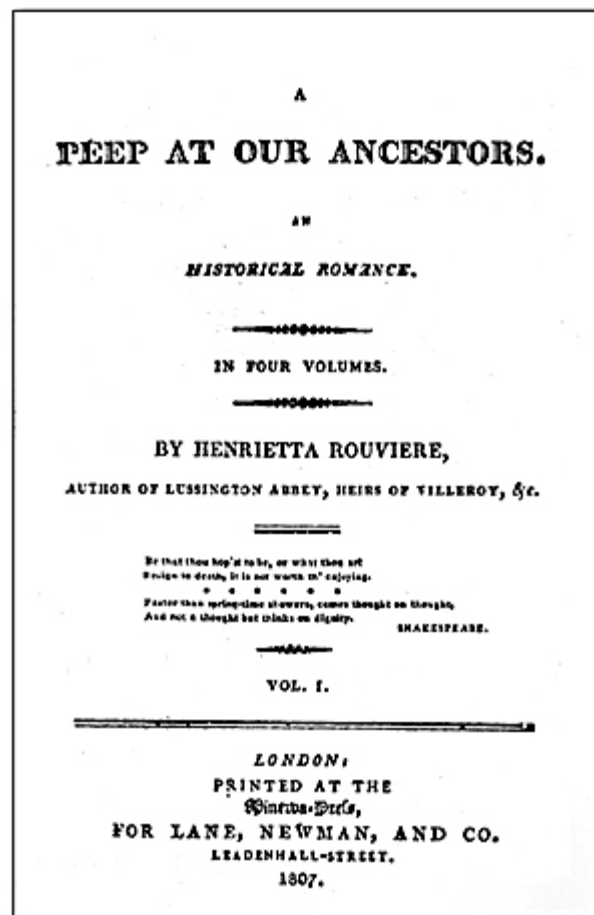
In subject as in setting, the historical novel participates in larger historiographic trends. Phillips has noted the increased popularity of biography and memoirs in the second half of the eighteenth century. Fictionalised biographies of historical figures, sometimes called 'heroic novels', fed off this demand for more intimate accounts of the lives of familiar historical figures. [16] Jane Porter's *The Scottish Chiefs* (1810), a fictionalised biography of William Wallace and a source for the film 'Braveheart', was the one of most popular 'heroic novels', but many other novelists preceded Porter in casting the life story of an intriguing historical figure as a novel, such as James White's *Adventures of King Richard Coeur-de-Lion* (1791), Henry Siddons's *William Wallace* (1791), or *Lady Jane Grey* (1791).

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The popularity of memoirs, biography, and heroic novel indicates the demand for stories about the private lives of public figures. This demand may partially be a by-product of the reduction in private or dramatic moments from the narratives of historiography. As Phillips has pointed out, invented speeches and the monarchical character-sketch were both important elements of classical historiography. Barbara Shapiro claims that the invented speech was the first 'fictional' element of historiography modern historians rejected. [17] Indeed, dramatic moments were becoming increasingly hard to find in historiography. The classics of eighteenth-century historical narrative depict their historical subjects speaking very infrequently. Edward Gibbon, for example, de-emphasises the biographical elements of his *Decline and Fall* (1776–88): 'To illustrate the obscure monuments of the life and death of each individual would prove a laborious task, alike barren of

instruction and of amusement.’ [18] When a very important character, such as the Emperor Julian, appears, Gibbon will give him at most a line or two of dialogue. Likewise, although Hume’s account of the execution of Charles I is as powerful and dramatic as any comparable incident from a novel, Hume usually avoids this type of biographical episode, merely providing an illustration of the character of each monarch at the end of his sections.

It is quite likely that contemporary readers would have wanted to see notable historical figures come to life on the page as they did on the stage. In order to write historiography with claims to be quasi-scientific fact, historians had to omit invented speeches, dialogue, and dramatic situations, first relegating them to the sidelines as ‘anecdotes’, as in Voltaire’s *Le Siècle de Louis XIV* (1751), and then exiling them from general history altogether. These then became the province of the historical novel. While some novelists chose to make a single notable figure the focus of their story, many novels featured only ‘cameo appearances’ by the notable figures of an era. This feature, which Lukács lauds as a mark of Scott’s originality and genius, was already a staple trope of the eighteenth-century historical novel. Examples of this type abound in the novels of this time. *The Borderers*, for example, features cameos by John of Gaunt, Geoffrey Chaucer, and Edward the Black Prince, while William Godwin’s eponymous protagonist meets Rabelais and Henry VIII in *St Leon: A Tale of the Sixteenth Century* (1799). Sometimes these cameos serve merely to place the novel within a particular period of history, while in other novels such as *The Recess: Or, A Tale of Other Times* (1783–85) the historical characters are as important as the fictional heroines.



When historical novelists chose not merely to embellish the detail of a real person’s life but to invent fictional characters to inhabit a real historical setting, novelists and reviewers had recourse to concepts of ‘typicality’ or ‘probability’ to defend this choice. Daston and Galison have discussed the idea of the ‘typical’ in relation to scientific atlases: ‘In eighteenth-century atlases, “typical” phenomena were those that hearkened back to some underlying *Typus* or “archetype,” and from which individual phenomena could be derived, at least conceptually. The typical is rarely if ever embodied in a single individual.’ [19] They further distinguish between two variants of the typical: ‘the “ideal” image purports to render not merely the typical but the perfect, while the “characteristic” image locates the typical in an individual’ (p. 88). For scientists, a ‘typical’ member of the species is a composite of various individuals which embodies the most important characteristics of that species. Novelists create something akin to a ‘characteristic’ image in their creation of a fictional hero or heroine supposed to be ‘typical’ of a given historical period. [20]

In the creation of typical but invented characters, historical novelists help to erect a boundary between fiction and history, truth and falsehood, while simultaneously transgressing it. In the preface to *A Peep at our Ancestors*, for example, Mosse suggests that certain rules apply to the writers of ‘historical romance’: ‘Yet Shakespeare, like some other dramatic and narrative writers, frequently subjects himself to the reproach of infidelity and distortion of fact. These writers appear to lose sight of that most essential law for compositions of this nature, that

fiction, but *not falsehood* is allowable in historical romance.’ [21] Historical fiction emerged at the moment when the history/fiction divide was being established, and in turn helped to create that distinction. Rouvière’s claim that ‘*fiction* but *not falsehood*’ is allowable in historical romance’ suggests the direction that this distinction followed. By accusing Shakespeare of ‘distortion of fact’ in his history plays, Rouvière makes space for a category of imaginative literature based on fact but subject to a different set of rules than historical composition. Similarly, reviewers of the anonymous *Minstrel* (1793) praised its historical verisimilitude:

it brings before the reader’s imagination the busy period of English history in which the contest between the houses of York and Lancaster was at its height, and places its characters in the midst of the great events of that period. The incidents, indeed, as well as most of the persons, are fictitious: but the writer adheres with fidelity to the general spirit and manners of the times. [22]

By capturing the ‘general spirit and manners of the times’, the author of *The Minstrel* has remained faithful to history, even while employing fictitious incidents and characters.

In choosing to focus on typical but fictitious embodiments of a particular era rather than familiar historical personages, novelists opened up new avenues for exploring ‘manners and customs’ or the everyday life of the past. In this way, their work is analogous to the that of the Scottish Enlightenment historians, antiquaries, and other commentators who were beginning to explore cultural and social history. *The Minstrel* is paradigmatic in its use of a ‘typical’ character to focus narrative and to provide access to a spectrum of historical detail. Set during the War of the Roses, the novel follows the noble and beautiful Eleanor, who, after the treacherous St Julian seizes her titles and lands and tries to force her to marry his son, escapes disguised as a minstrel. Because of her disguise, Eleanor is able to enter the ranks and interact with the most important figures on both sides of the conflict, including King Henry VI. She also encounters an assortment of medieval social types, including bear baiters, a ‘travelling vender of pardons and indulgencies from the pope’, and members of the peasantry. [23] While helping a family to improve their cottage, Eleanor sees the domestic arrangements of a peasant family during this period: ‘there was a *chimney*, [...] *pewter* spoons, instead of wooden ones, were used in the family [...] the beds and bulsters were all of *feathers*, and all of them had *sheets*’ (III, 81). Through the medium of the minstrel, the novel surveys a range of social ranks, providing us glimpses of the private life of both the peasantry and the nobility. [24]

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Similarly, Henrietta Rouviere Mosse’s *Peep at our Ancestors* offers a voyeuristic account of private life in English history. The author employs a visual metaphor to suggest that the novel form allows an eyewitness approach to history: ‘aided by records and documents she has kindly been permitted to consult, she may have succeeded in a correct though faint sketch of the times she treats, and in affording, if through a dim, yet not distorted nor discoloured glass, “A Peep at Our Ancestors” ’ (I, xiv–xv). Mosse’s novel is perhaps closest in spirit to the works of the engraver and antiquary Joseph Strutt, whose works mingled engravings and descriptions to illustrate the clothing, pastimes, and manners of the past visually. [25] Similarly, *A Peep at our Ancestors* uses narrative description to recreate the past visually in the mind of the reader.

Joseph Strutt’s own historical novel *Queenhoo-Hall* embodies the extremes of antiquarianism in the novel. Because of his encyclopaedic knowledge of everyday life in the Middle Ages, Strutt pauses his story every time he has a chance to expound upon a new historical detail, for example inserting paragraph-long descriptions of each character’s clothing in the midst of a dialogue. Strutt also attempts to historicise the language of the characters, but the resulting dialogue sounds awkward: ‘ “By our holy-dam, my lady,” said Oswald, bowing, “I weened they were: but, I trow, the varlets have contrived some new knackeries” ’ (I, 25). More successful is Elizabeth Strutt’s *Borderers*, which balances its depiction of everyday life in a Scottish castle, including food, clothing, pastimes, heraldry, and chivalric tournaments, with a sentimental love story. Even novels that were much less descriptive than *The Borderers* emphasise their depiction of ‘manners’. The preface to *Edwy; Son of Ethelred the Second* (1791) claims that ‘The Authoress has endeavoured to

make her Hero speak and act conformable to the manners of the age in which he lived; and throughout the tale, she has endeavoured to depict manners as they were at that remote period.' [26]

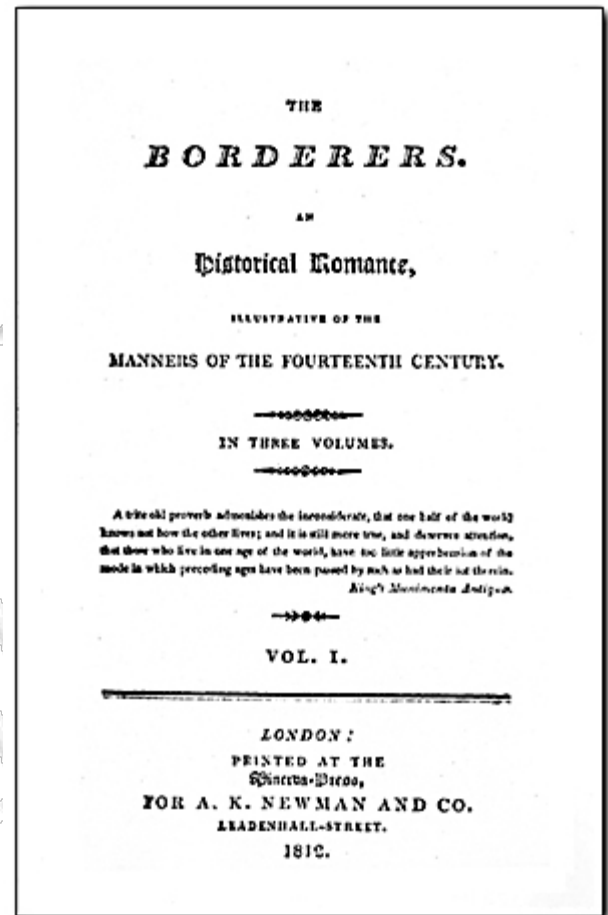
The freedom which the historical novel allowed in creating fictional characters typical of a particular era was essential to authors more interested in surveying historical manners than particular historical figures. Through the concept of 'typical' or 'probable' but fictional characters and situations, novelists mediated between historical truth and historical fiction, staking out their territory as the form of historical representation best suited to depicting everyday life, domesticity, and interiority. Another historiographic contradiction that the historical novel was well suited to mediate was the opposition between local knowledge and universal truths. Peter Dear has defined objectivity as 'knowledge that is not local; it is not contingent on the situation (in the broadest sense) of the individual knower'. [27] For eighteenth-century historians, defining a set of standards for historical objectivity presented a challenge, since much of the historical record consisted of the testimony of individual observers, often biased and contradictory. The materialist side of antiquarianism was one way around the problem of having to rely on individual testimony for knowledge of the past, based as it was reading artefacts instead of texts. Where people could and often did lie or exaggerate, material objects told the truth. What exactly they were saying, however, was a matter of dispute. By the second half of the eighteenth century, historians and antiquaries were attempting in various ways to deduce more general truths from the individual fragments of antiquarian research. Before nineteenth-century archaeologists codified more scientific principles for the study of material artefacts, antiquaries often had to import some type of general historical narrative in order to make sense of their fragmentary findings. The Scottish Enlightenment historians' general narrative of the progress of society was perhaps the most productive of these narratives, which also included religious and mythical schema. Historians struggled to find the correct balance between local empirical knowledge and general scientific truths.

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In the historical novel, a version of this conflict was carried out on the level of point of view. The majority of historical novels employed third-person authoritative narrators (the same type of impersonal voices who narrated historiographic works) in order to lend an air of objectivity to their novels. These third-person narrators, such as the narrator of *The Minstrel*, inhabit the same historical moment as the readers of the novel and often compare the past they describe to the present they live in:

Far, very far distant was the condition of the peasantry of England in those iron times, from the happy freedom of the present. *Now*, the poor man selecting the place of his residence, hires his humble cottage of the rich, and for its annual stipend enjoys in it every right of property, but the power of destruction [...] *Then*, the kingdom distributed into baronies, each lord reigned despotic in his district, and the lower order of peasants, termed villains, were the abject slaves of his arbitrary will [...] (III, 27–28)

The obtrusive narrator of *The Borderers* shows a surprising degree of historical relativism, using



historical details to reflect upon class and gender issues. For example, a note on the phrase ‘above the salt’ explains:

Formerly the whole family, however numerous, sat down at table together, but that there might be some distinction retained between the master and his dependants, a large salt-cellar was placed in the middle of the board, the most honourable places being above it; at the same time that it formed a boundary, which any delicacy that the table might afford was not expected to pass. (I, 210)

In detailing the domestic customs of the fourteenth century, the novel illustrates an alternative set of class distinctions, where the servants and the family ‘sat down at table together’. The praxis is interrupted at another point in order to describe the education of a woman at the time, in music, dancing, medicine, and needlework (I, 31). The narrator reflects upon female education:

the difference between an education of the fourteenth century and the nineteenth, was not trifling; but the respect paid to the sex, in the interim, has apparently decreased, in proportion as their claim to it may have seemed to increase. Women, mortifying as the confession may be, never more powerfully influenced society than when they could neither read or write—never were more respected in it. (I, 32–33)

This reflection indicates a non-progressive model of history, where women’s social influence has actually receded. The author seems to advocate a greater degree of women’s rights, using historical example as a way to highlight the lack of power women possessed in her time.

Although most historical novels employed the historian’s point of view to narrate a ‘tale of other times’ while commenting upon its significance for contemporary readers, other historical novels emphasised their status as local knowledge by employing first-person narrators. Mark Phillips has remarked upon eighteenth-century experiments with spectatorial narrative, such as Helen Maria Williams’s *Letters from France* (1790–92), as indicative of a shift to a more inward, sentimental engagement with history:

sympathetic reading was part of a crucial expansion of the aims of historical writing in the course of which the traditional historical task of mimesis was reinterpreted to include the evocation of past experience. History enlarged its scope to incorporate the wider spectrum both of actors and experiences that made up a modern, commercial, and increasingly middle-class society. [28]

Through the use of a first-person narrator, an author could create a more immediate, eyewitness account of historical life. By encouraging sympathetic identification, readers were able to live vicariously in another era.

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One way in which this identification was achieved was through annotated editions of memoirs, autobiography, or collections of letters. Over the course of the eighteenth century, historians began to look to the personal letter as a means of gaining a more immediate relationship to the past. Lenglet du Fresnoy’s early-eighteenth-century treatise, *A New Method of Studying History* (1728), is one of the first to promote the value of letters as historical sources: ‘I do not believe there is a more secure Method of knowing History, than from Memoirs and Letters.’ [29] In letters, he claims, ‘we find History in its Purity, the Passions of Mankind are better represented than in Historians themselves’. [30] In fact, by mid-century collections of personal letters began to be published for their value as historical sources. At the same time, an epistolary historical novel, such as Sophia Lee’s *The Recess*, presented fictitious letters from Matilda and Ellinor, the imaginary daughters of Mary, Queen of Scots, as a means to achieve sympathetic identification with characters from the past.

While Lee exploits the epistolary form to generate sympathy, however, she also uses the form to create the effect of scepticism in the mind of the reader. The sceptical implications of her novel work to open up a space for her fictionalisation of history, whereby fiction becomes the necessary supplement to a historical record fraught with conspiracy, uncertainty, and conflicting accounts. Deception is the very condition for success in the Renaissance political world of *The Recess*:

'James ardently desired to be nominated as the successor of Elizabeth by herself, and had not spared bribes, promises, or flattery, to interest those around her whom he thought likely to influence her choice'. [31] Here Lee reiterates the eighteenth-century critique of political corruption—of the history that takes place behind the history—found in the 'secret histories' of Delarivier Manley or the musings of Gulliver upon seeing the truth behind history at Glubdubdrigg. [32] Like her successor, Elizabeth also deceives (and is deceived) to succeed:

Elizabeth, in defiance of time and understanding, indulged a romantic taste inconsistent with either; and, not satisfied with real pre-eminence, affected to be deified by the flattery of verse. The Lady of the Lake was the title she chose to be known by here, and nothing art could invent, or wealth procure, was wanting to render the various pageants complete. A boat scooped like a shell, and enclosing a throne, conveyed her to the aight, where I and many more, habited like Nereids, waited to receive her. (p. 80)

The pageantry of Elizabeth's court, later romanticised in Scott's *Kenilworth*, is presented here as nothing more than ridiculous flattery. [33] The panegyric of the Elizabethan court poets receives its necessary corrective in Matilda's account of Elizabeth's tyranny.



Ellinor's inserted narrative, placed at the very centre of the novel, further enhances the effect of scepticism for the reader. Covering the same period of time as Matilda's narrative, Ellinor sometimes fills in gaps and elsewhere subverts what has come before. In the first page of 'The Life of Ellinor, Addressed to Matilda', Ellinor describes Matilda's husband in terms that contradict the preceding narrative. She calls Leicester 'callous', 'timid and subtle', and 'tyrannic' (p. 156), thus forcing the reader to re-evaluate Matilda's panegyric. In fact, in Ellinor's narrative Leicester is transformed from romantic hero to the shadowy double of Elizabeth: 'I feared the keen eye of Elizabeth, and the colder and more watchful one of Lord Leicester' (p. 159). Other features of Ellinor's narrative have the effect of destabilising the reader's certainty about historical narrative. Most of the major events in Ellinor's story, and indeed, of the entire novel, hinge on some form of falsehood or deception. Leicester's death may be merely a 'fiction': 'In fine, having bribed the servants employed in blazoning this pompous fiction, the family were indubitably assured, the body buried under the name Lord Leicester, was one procured for the purpose' (p. 184). Similarly, Ellinor stages her own death in order to be able to follow Essex to Ireland (p. 218); while earlier, Elizabeth forced her to sign a false document, a spurious confession (p. 178). She remarks upon the deceptions practiced on the world: 'Oh, misjudging world, how severely on the most superficial observation dost thou venture to decide!' (pp. 206–07), but she deceives herself when she masquerades as a man to follow Essex. The emphasis on deception, forgery, and fiction creates a sense of scepticism about official historical accounts, and if there is no sure way to distinguish fact from fiction, a fictitious history may be the best method to understand the past.

Fictitious histories such as *The Recess* and the other novels discussed in this paper shared a number of features and functions with the historical and antiquarian publications of the late eighteenth century. In form, both fictitious and 'true' histories utilised footnotes, prefaces, and other paratextual devices to display their learning. In function, novels like *The Recess* demonstrated dissatisfaction with received historical accounts and attempted to supplement them by inventing fictitious accounts of important periods of history. Antiquaries expressed a similar scepticism about documents and historical generalisations in a number of activities, such as their interest in investigating forgers like James Macpherson and Thomas Chatterton and their revisionist attitude toward familiar figures, as evidenced in Horace Walpole's *Historic Doubts on the Life and Reign of King Richard III* (1768). In fact, the subtitle of *The Recess: A Tale of Other Times*, is taken from one of the most famous forgeries of the day, Macpherson's Ossian poems (1760–65). [34] Antiquaries and historical novelists also shared the function of supplementing political and military history by investigating other aspects of the past, such as social and cultural details and by providing ways to engage with the past more sympathetically. These novels, some tedious and derivative and others unjustly forgotten by literary history, provide new perspectives on the history of history in the Romantic period. By the time Walter Scott came to publish *Waverley* in 1814, he was working within an already established genre. [35] A better understanding of the features and

functions of this genre will help us to shed new light on Scott's remarkable undertaking, as well as on the achievements of nineteenth-century historian.



NOTES

1. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage, 1970).
2. Mark Salber Phillips, *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740–1820* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). Other key works on eighteenth-century historiography and antiquarianism include Devoney Looser, *British Women Writers and the Writing of History, 1670–1820* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Joseph M. Levine, *The Battle of the Books: History and Literature in the Augustan Age* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1991); Martin Myrone and Lucy Peltz (eds.), *Producing the Past: Aspects of Antiquarian Culture and Practice* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999); Thomas Preston Peardon, *The Transition in English Historical Writing 1760–1830* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1933); Stuart Piggott, *Ruins in a Landscape: Essays in Antiquarianism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1976); and Rosemary Sweet, 'Antiquaries and Antiquities in Eighteenth-Century England', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 34 (2001), 181–206.
3. Herbert Butterfield, *The Historical Novel: An Essay* (1924; Folcroft: Folcroft Library Editions, 1971); Avrom Fleishman, *The English Historical Novel: Walter Scott to Virginia Woolf* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971); Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1962); Harry Shaw, *The Forms of Historical Fiction: Sir Walter Scott and his Successors* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1983).
4. Maxwell's intriguing 'Pretenders in Sanctuary' defines the genre through a particular thematic element: 'At the core of the genre, sustaining it through many changes, is a defining 'subgenre', the narrative of pretenders in sanctuary—first told during the Renaissance but finding its place in novels only around the beginning of the 1730s'—*Modern Language Quarterly* 61 (2000), 289. See also Margaret Anne Doody, *The True Story of the Novel* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996) and April Alliston, *Virtue's Faults: Correspondences in Eighteenth-Century British and French Women's Fiction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).
5. Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).
6. On the historical novels of the early eighteenth century, see Ros Ballaster, *Seductive Forms: Women's Amatory Fiction from 1684 to 1740* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) and John J. Richetti, *Popular Fiction before Richardson: Narrative Patterns 1700–1739* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969).
7. The recent publication of Peter Garside, James Raven, and Rainer Schöwerling's *The English Novel 1770–1829: A Bibliographical Survey of Prose Fiction Published in the British Isles*, 2 vols. (Oxford: OUP, 2000) has enabled a fuller understanding of the larger publishing trends in this period. In the brief survey of historical fiction that follows, I make no claims to exhaustive knowledge of quite a large class of novels. Rather, I have chosen to focus my attention on the handful of historical novels in the period which most directly seem to be influenced by developments in historiography.
8. In the list above, 'novel' and 'romance' are used interchangeably. In fact, one result of my investigation into Romantic-era historical fiction is a greater sense that these terms were less distinct during this period than modern scholars would have them.
9. The popular histories of Hume and Goldsmith, however, were read widely and often served as schoolroom textbooks.
10. *English Fiction of the Romantic Period 1789–1830* (London: Longman, 1989), p. 99.
11. *Queenhoo-Hall, A Romance: and Ancient Times, a Drama*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: John Murray, 1808), I, i. Subsequent quotations will be taken from this edition and given in the text.
12. *The Borderers: An Historical Romance, Illustrative of the Manners of the Fourteenth Century*, 3 vols. (London: Minerva Press, 1812), I, iii. Subsequent quotations will be taken from this edition and given in the text.
13. *Don Sebastian; or, the House of Braganza. An Historical Romance*, 2 vols. (1809; Philadelphia: Carey, 1810), I, iv–v.



[14.](#) The preface claims to: ‘exhibit the manners, customs, and state of the ancient nations in a style more descriptive than has hitherto been attempted’—Alexander Thomson, *Memoirs of a Pythagorean. In Which Are Delineated the Manners, Customs, Genius, and Polity of Ancient Nations. Interspersed with a Variety of Anecdotes*, 3 vols. (London: Robinsons, 1785), I, iv. In this work, a Pythagorean is reincarnated in various ancient nations, which provides an occasion to describe the culture of these places.

[15.](#) See, for example, *Charles Dacres: or, The Voluntary Exile. An Historical Novel, Founded on Facts*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: John Moir, 1797). It begins in ‘A.D. Seventeen hundred and sixty, odd’ (I, 16), and features encounters with notable figures, such as the Pretender ‘who, every opera-night, went to sleep at the theatre’ (I, 98).



[16.](#) The phrase is taken from a review of *The Castle of Mowbray* (1788): ‘The heroic novel, where characters are taken from real life, is a pleasing kind of composition; but it is the bow of Ulysses and requires strength as well as address to bend it. Our author possesses neither. He has mutilated history, is unacquainted with the human heart, and deficient in judgment; yet with these defects, he enters into the lists as the rival of Horace Walpole and Miss Lee’—*Critical Review* 66 (1788), 577.

[17.](#) *A Culture of Fact: England, 1550–1720* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 41.

[18.](#) *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. Dero A. Saunders (1776–88; London: Penguin, 1981), p. 173.

[19.](#) Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, ‘The Image of Objectivity’, *Representations* 40 (1992), 87.

[20.](#) On characterological ‘typicality’, see Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, op. cit. and ‘Narrate or Describe?’ in *Writer and Critic*, ed. and trans. Arthur Kahn (London: Merlin Press, 1970), pp. 110–48. Lukács adapts the term from Georg Hegel’s *Aesthetics* (originally published as part of *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s Werke*, 1832–45).



[21.](#) *A Peep at our Ancestors: An Historical Romance*, 4 vols. (London: Minerva Press, 1807), I, xiii. Subsequent references will be taken from this edition and included in the text.

[22.](#) *Monthly Review* 13 (1794), 192.

[23.](#) *The Minstrel; or, Anecdotes of Distinguished Personages in the Fifteenth Century*, 3 vols. (London: Hookham and Carpenter, 1793), II, 129. Subsequent references will be taken from this edition and included in the text.

[24.](#) See also Joseph Strutt’s *Queenhoo-Hall*: ‘The different degrees of the people, from the nobleman to the peasant, have their places in the romance’ (I, iii).

[25.](#) See especially *A Complete View of the Dress and Habits of the People of England from the Establishment of the Saxons in Britain to the Present Time*, 2 vols. (1842; London: Tabard Press, 1970) and *Horde Angel-Cynnan: or a Compleat View of the Manners, Customs, Arms, Habits, & c. of the Inhabitants of England, from the Arrival of the Saxons, till the Reign of Henry the Eighth. With a Short Account of the Britons, during the Government of the Romans*, 2 vols. (London: Benjamin White, 1775–76).



[26.](#) *Edwy; Son of Ethelred the Second: An Historic Tale*, 2 vols. (Dublin: For the Authoress, 1791), I, 6.

[27.](#) ‘From Truth to Disinterestedness in the Seventeenth Century’, *Social Studies of Science* 22 (1992), 620.

[28.](#) Phillips, p. 127.

[29.](#) Nicolas Lenglet du Fresnoy, *A New Method of Studying History: Recommending More Easy and Complete Instructions for Improvements in that Science than any Hitherto Extant: With the Whole Apparatus Necessary to Form a Perfect Historian*, trans. Richard Rawlinson, 2 vols. (London: W. Burton, 1728), I, 221.

[30.](#) *Ibid.*, I, 225.



[31.](#) Sophia Lee, *The Recess: Or, a Tale of Other Times*, ed. April Alliston (1783–85; Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2000), p. 259.

[32.](#) 'I was chiefly disgusted with modern History. For having strictly examined all the Persons of greatest Name in the Courts of Princes for a Hundred Years past, I found how the World had been misled by prostitute Writers, to ascribe the greatest Exploits in War to Cowards, the wisest Counsel to Fools, Sincerity to Flatterers [...] Here I discovered the true Causes of many great Events that have surprised the World: How a Whore can govern the Back-stairs, the Back-stairs a Council, and the Council a Senate'—Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, ed. Paul Turner (1726; Oxford: OUP, 1971), pp. 199–200.

[33.](#) On the connections between *The Recess* and *Kenilworth* see Fiona Robertson's *Legitimate Histories: Scott, Gothic, and the Authorities of Fiction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

[34.](#) For an interesting discussion of the connections between the forgeries of Macpherson and Chatterton and the historical novels of Walter Scott, see Ian Haywood's *The Making of History: A Study of the Literary Forgeries of James Macpherson and Thomas Chatterton in Relation to Eighteenth-Century Ideas of History and Fiction* (London: Associated University Presses, 1986)

[35.](#) See also P. D. Garside, 'Walter Scott and the "Common" Novel, 1808–1819', *Cardiff Corvey: Reading the Romantic Text* 3 (Sep 1999). Online: Internet (Oct 2001): <http://www.cf.ac.uk/encap/corvey/articles/cc03_n02.html>.

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