

The Historical Novel in Literature.

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It is our purpose to study the historical novel as a product of modern times, simply touching facts relating to the early traces which have appeared in various forms.

Unless we have read a truly historic novel, we can scarcely conceive what it is, or what relation it bears to what we ordinarily think of as history. Certainly we cannot appreciate its importance as a means of stimulating and inspiring love and sympathy for the past lives and scenes of which we are a continuation.

History proper brings before us the facts of the past; but it is to the historical novel that we turn if we would become a part of those historic facts, for there we have history "touched with emotion".

Life that belongs to some past age or some faraway country is portrayed, and in that life we seem to enter. Life is given to character from whom we feel a living inspiration. Indeed the true historic novel would have us respond to the nature and to the surroundings to which it has given this

new life. Such is our conception of what the historic novel should mean, and we have many novels which describe and portray leading characters and important circumstances which really existed, bringing before us the customs, conditions, and surroundings of a past century in a manner which cultivates our affections, and gives us a knowledge unobtainable from the dry facts and statements as history would give them.

The modern historical novel seems to have evolved before history was much appreciated, and no doubt this form of novel helped to develop that taste. There are various reasons why the historic novel received so little attention before Sir Walter Scott's time. In the early Greek and Roman literatures we are told that they apparently had a conception of this as shown in their use of mythological characters in the absence of any historical ones. In the early romances there were probably some actual events mixed with the fictitious ones; but

we must have more history before this novel can be written. Going down to the time of Elizabeth we find a period in which the drama predominated, and in which the minds of the people were occupied with religious and political liberty; so there was no time to think of history, but material was being made which was later interwoven with fiction by a master-mind.

From our study we learn that the people up to the middle of the last century had formed no taste for history in any form, so that when our great historians began their work of putting together their countries' history. It gave the people something to think about. With this new field of thought we should expect literature to show some phase of it. so we are not so surprised that there appeared that great series of historical novels by Sir Walter Scott, - the Waverley, which distinguished the historic novel and gave it a place in literature.

If we would know something

of this great creation we must go back to the childhood of the originator, and then we see at work the forces which in later years produced such a great result. Living among the country folk as Scott did, and having a natural love for the stories and legends of Scottish life which they told him, he recd such a knowledge of his country's history that in later years he had an inexhaustible treasury of that from which to draw. Not only did he gain a knowledge of history, but mingling as he did with all classes of people he also learned to know human nature and to love mankind deeply.

Having these necessary features is not all, however; There must be the imaginative genius who can combine them, and Sir Walter Scott showed himself just such a genius in his Waverley novels. These portray Scottish life and character with a vividness which only one who had studied and loved it as Scott had could do. The fact that he had so mingled and entered

into the lives of all classes made it possible for him to attain this splendid achievement; but it is not only Scottish history that this great mind has interwoven with fiction. We can do no better in our study of England's history during the Middle Ages than to supplement it with "Ivanhoe", one of Scott's most delightful novels. From it one gets a very good idea of life under the Feudal system and customs of the 12th century. For a later period during the reign of Elizabeth in the 16th century he has given us "Kenilworth" which brings us close to Elizabeth by interesting us in the people and customs of which she was a part; and so he has written of many different periods. As one author says, "Scott has brought alike the times of the Crusades and of the Stuarts before us. He has peopled the land of Palestine, and the hills of Scotland, the forests of England and the borders of the Rhine; Paladins and peasant; earl and yeoman; kings and their jesters; bluff men at arms and gentle tower marchers all

spring into life again, at the touch of the "Great Enchanter."

With this achievement a new field was open to the writer for there began to develop a taste for history and for higher ideals, and in almost every country there were attempts to write the historic novel, and some most excellent ones have been produced, but no writer since Scott has written so extensively along this line, altho new features and different styles have been introduced. His greatest successor is said to be Dumas, who is a French writer. His novels are ranked superior to Scott's in their power of holding the sustained attention of the reader, but his portrayal of character is inferior. Another French writer also took up this form of the novel, and it is worth while to read his masterpiece, "Les Misérables" if only to get his famous description of the Battle of Waterloo.

The novels of the English writer, Charles Kingsley, are valued very highly for their historic value and character

sketches. In "Hypatia" we find many horrible things pictured, but if we ^{would} realize what life meant in the largest seaport of the 5th century A.D. we must see some very dark pictures. Again in "Alton Locke" Kingsley takes us to the sweat-
ers dens and the dungeons where so many of England's poor exist -

Thackeray, another English novelist has given us Henry Esmond which is ranked as the greatest English historical novel. It is representative of English life in the 18th century, when Queen Anne was on the throne. He also wrote "The Virginians", in which Braddock and Washington figure. "The Last Days of Pompeii" deserves mention. We know according to history that in 79 A.D. Pompeii and Herculaneum were buried beneath lava and scoria from Vesuvius but we cannot realize its terribleness unless we can enter somewhat into Roman life as it was in this early period and feel something of the hopes and aspirations of those people.

"A Tale of Two Cities" by Charles

Dickens takes us into the French Revolution, when the horrors of the guillotine are brought before us. Mrs. Eliot, too, has produced one historical novel which, by many, is considered a masterly work. It is a story of scenes in Florence in the days of Savonarola -

Coming across to our own America we have had produced some historical novels which, no doubt, have aided largely in determining questions upon which hung a people's liberty; and this we can say of "Uncle Tom's Cabin". For in it, Mrs. Stowe has vividly portrayed "Man's inhumanity to man." No facts as to the condition of the Negro could have touched the chords of sympathy as did this pathetic story -

The greatest historical novels in American literature are the work of James Fenimore Cooper. As the Negro figures in "Uncle Tom's Cabin" so in many of Cooper's novels we have the American Indian characterized. "Romance"

by Helen Hunt Jackson is a most pathetic appeal to human hearts for sympathy for the Indian and his rights.

Miss Austin has written some very delightful novels of Colonial life. "Ben Hur" written in recent years by Lew Lew Wallace, is one that people like to read and re-read. The life of the Roman and of the Jew and the feelings between them during the time of Christ, are very interestingly told. The descriptions are all impressive.

A Polish writer - Henryk Sienkiewicz has distinguished himself in recent years by writing historical novels of Poland - Russia and Sweden, chiefly, and one, his most popular, in America, at least - is written of Roman life. The title is "Quo Vadis". It is recommended to readers of history as being a most vivid description of the times of Nero and of the cruelties of this Roman ruler, and it is said of Sienkiewicz that he "writes of things Roman as any Roman of them all in the first century might have written". The historical novel certainly has

established itself in our literature, as something which the mind demands if it would know; as something which history demands if it would teach.

It has, of course, been criticized, and for a few years, about the middle of this century, it was somewhat on the decline. One writer says of this that those who are old enough to remember can recall "how the Reviews greeted the advent of a historical novel, not with a note of contempt, but with the sort of surprise which men greet something out of the way or old fashioned."

However the last twenty years have seen it grow in favor. We have much reverence for the one who can bring before us the past so vividly; no patience with those critics who say that it is "mere laziness on the part of authors who ransack history for their plots."

The novelist who takes up this writing has not perhaps the room to exercise his imagination that the themes of other novels allow for he must have his characters do what is natural

and do that which a human life has done, and not just what the writer would have them do; but that is where in the beauty of the historical novel lies.

As man is developing, he cares more for the study of life as it really is, and has been, and it is to the historical novel that he turns for this study and help.