

# 'Consider History'

## By The Unreliable Narrator

Consider history with the beginnings of it stretching dimly into the remote time; emerging darkly out of the mysterious eternity: the true epic poem and universal divine scripture. — Thomas Carlyle

History, of course, is the sister of Literature: they have much in common, in that they are both *not true*. But whereas Literature runs aroundnd uniee garden barefoot in

that line, or at least helps define its edge. Scott began with recent history, seeking to put a touch of balm on an ugly wound. By accident his novels coincided with the first great discovery of Progress, which turned the world upside down. No longer was the past the abode of gods and heroes, no longer did we have to bow beneath the weight of ancestral greatness. Times were changing, visibly, in front of our eyes; the past was left behind and we began to climb up towards the future, improvement by improvement. Suddenly, the past was rendered exotic, picturesque. A fit subject for vicarious reading. Documented places, events and characters mingled freely with imaginary ones; life was breathed into dusty records; and the closed and foreign country of the past opened to admit the casual tourist for just a little while. Long enough to see the sights, at least, but not long enough to catch anything from the locals.

Perhaps Scotland's first experiment with conscious historical fiction can be found in John Barbour's epic vernacular poem *The Brus*, dating from the 1370s. Based at least in part, one can assume, on eyewitness testimony, this is vastly more than a mere chronicle: historical figures have character and motivation, and if Barbour plays fast and loose with the actualité, as often as not it's simply just to make a better story. In this issue, you can find out more in Christine Robinson's article, *Back to the Future*. Another medieval writer's works are addressed in Kevin McGinley's study of Robert Henryson's *Fables*, an historical detective tale in its own right. Suitably, our featured publisher this issue is the Scottish Text Society, which for more than a century now has been moving older Scottish literature out of museums and into libraries. Marina Dossena explores the origins of languages, and the languages of origins, in *When Antiquarians Looked At The Thistle*. Murray Pittock calls the histories of the Jacobites to account, and Ronald Renton weighs up the historical fictions of Neil Munro in *The Ell-Wand and the Sword*.

Romance and realism. Truth and lies. *The Bottle Imp* holds plenty of them all!

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her nightie, inventing stuff left, right and centre while claiming that she's reaching for a higher Truth, poor old History must always fret and frown about facts and objective reality, aiming for accurate interpretation, her feet firmly on the ground and buckled into sensible shoes. Literature is wooed by artists and poets and has no regrets; History has long, intense affairs with radicals and politicians, which all without fail end badly. She's left to cook the tea and do the washing-up, too.

For all her clear good sense, though, History is the junior partner. Like her sister, she strives to form convincing tales from a jumble of notes and jottings. She has invoked great schemes to try to frame the world, from divine favour to predestination to dialectical materialism. Thomas Carlyle, who cleaved to the Calvinist interpretation, used his formidable imagination to build sweeping and consciously theatrical epics of the past and built his histories around the forceful actions of Great Men. In due course, of course, his Histories become history; now, in Gregory Burke's *Black Watch*, men are dragged willy-nilly from Scotland to Iraq and back again. There is undoubted greatness in them but they are flung about by the world - indeed in one scene physically carried down the Golden Thread of regimental history, helpless in its grasp. They do not drive events; they experience and recount them, the one blurring into the other.

There is no plan, no plot to human affairs, no steady pulse of history, only random fibrillating twitches that knock us here and there. Historical inevitability is retrospective only. History is the extraction of narrative from out of chaos, as artificial as any stage-scene or literary device. Where, then, do we draw the line between History and Literature? The Historical novel - another Scottish invention: Scott's *Waverley* can go on the tea-towel with all the others - straddles that line, or at least helps define its edge. Scott began with recent history, seeking to put a touch of balm on an ugly wound. By accident his novels coincided with the first great discovery of Progress, which turned the world upside down.

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