



Historical Fields and Objects in Sir Walter Scott's *The Talisman* and Ken Follett's *Fall of Giants*

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Abstract:

Historical fiction has seen a renaissance in the twenty-first century, one of theoretical inquisitiveness and practical applications. Flipping through the past, all popular works of literature are historical narratives, whatever the genre chosen by the writer. But the modern age of postmodernism and deconstruction has changed the vantage points of the readers, re-readers and writers. Sir Walter Scott's *The Talisman*, an epic tale of racism and cultural hegemony, appears a romantic dashing tale of adventure but is actually a satiric piece on the disadvantages of chivalry and colonialism. Ken Follett's *Fall of Giants* is a new age tome on World War I initiated to satisfy the private feuds of politicians, to seize resources of allies and to topple Germany from becoming a world power. This paper analyses the visualizations of historical fields – settings and backgrounds – and historical objects – real-life historical characters – for representations of true historical accounts in the said works of fiction.

Keywords: *New Historicism, Metahistory, historical field, historical object, Sir Walter Scott, Ken Follett*

All the popular tales of world literature are historical fiction, including legends and myths of yore, to the twenty-first century theory embedded literary texts. When Johann Wolfgang von Goethe coined the term 'Weltliteratur', he had world histories and culture in mind and aspired to propagate these throughout Europe when his readers' tastes were limited to native and white writers. The discovery of historical fiction began with the discovery of the world's first piece of extant written literature, the clay tablets in the royal library of Ashurbanipal. Sir Austen Henry Layard excavated the library in 1851 and found the clay tablets containing *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the world's first and oldest literary work dating to around 2500 BC. The mythical epic is the inspiration of dragons, monsters and fantastical beasts but it is also about a real tyrant who ruled over Sumerian lands a long time ago and the epic was some scribe's attempt at driving the attack to the tyrant.

Popular classics like *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, *The Aeneid*, *The Mabinogion*, *The Nibelungenlied*, *Beowulf*, *Njal's Saga* and *The Luciwades* are tales that have preserved the culture and geographical data of the ancient world beside the tiny bits of histories in them. These sagas continue to entertain millions of readers even today. Masterpieces like

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Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, Shakespeare's historical plays, Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel*, Byron's *Don Juan*, Shelley's *Ozymandias* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* are all historical narratives that romanticize the actions of the protagonists. After the nineteenth century, historical fiction began to take on individual causes like racism as in Tony Morrison's *Beloved*, feminism in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, dominance and the adversities of war in Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and many other narratives became subjective histories – each fighting for a cause. With the birth of postmodernism and deconstruction, historical fiction takes on a new turn. Rehistoricizing or presenting new facts from extant history is the trend of today's historical writings. History is contested by Dame Hilary Mantel, Philippa Gregory, Wilbur Smith, Paolo Coelho and Ken Follett.

The shaping of historical fiction as a stand-alone genre credits Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) who established certain parameters for the said genre that writers follow till date. Scott moved historical timelines and made his heroes detached. Historical objects remain passive observers or mere passers-by and pine away because they cannot change anything. Scott asserts that history repeats itself and freedom, if it comes at all, is just momentary. He brought together the romantic-satiric mode of expression that gives the readers a pseudo-romantic experience while at the same time making them realize the disadvantages of the historical timeline. Among the new age historical fiction writers, Kenneth Martin Follett (1949) is the only one who uses similar styles as Sir Walter Scott. Follett, in addition to everything laid down by Scott, introduces the base-superstructure pattern. Historical objects are either producers or consumers; the producer-base being the victims of tyranny and oppression. Follett believes that history is a cycle that repeats itself once in a while.

The term 'Metahistory', coined by Northrop Frye, is used by American historical theorist Hayden White in his *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th Century Europe* (2014) to undermine a set of analytical skills for historians, literary theorists and writers. White asserts that history is diachronic, and all history is narrative and all narratives are historical. He also believes that historical fictions contain more facts than they have been given credit for. The authenticity of these narratives are questioned every now and then by theorists but they do change history. Some of these were written as mere records, some as a product of rebellion against some monarch and some as a covert piece of irony. But all of them stand the test of time and continue to remind us that nothing has changed. This paper analyses historical fields and objects in select narratives by Sir Walter Scott and Ken Follett, thereby ascertaining that history is relative and applies to the present and the future. Historical fields are the atmosphere and the setting while the objects are real historical characters and symbols are all historical artifacts.

The themes of racism, religious and cultural hegemony are presented in Scott's *The Talisman* (1825), set in Syria and Jordan of the twelfth century. The historical artifact of the title serves as a symbol that brings out the reality behind the supposed holy wars of the Third Crusade in the twelfth century. The symbol shows the readers that the Crusades accomplished nothing – the Crusaders had not gained a single piece of land, much less the Holy Sepulchre – and returned to their homelands. But they returned rich after amassing hoards of wealth from seizing Muslim



villages and plundering them. The Templars were the richest of all and soon invented the world's first banks. Prince Saladin got back all of the lands conquered by previous crusaders, though conquering lands was never part of their agenda, and the Third Crusade began under the commands of Richard I, the "island sovereign" (Scott, *Talisman* 20; ch. 3 [1]) of Great Britain; King Philip of France and Frederick Barbarossa, the Holy Roman Emperor. Though their primary aim was to regain the True Cross, the crusaders initiated forced conversions and the Crusades became the Inquisition.

What started as a noble cause of saving the Holy Sepulchre, soon turned into a nightmare of rivalry, pilfering and internecine warfare among the Crusaders:

the ranks of the Crusaders were daily thinned, not only by the desertion of individuals, but of entire bands headed by their respective feudal leaders, who withdrew from a contest in which they had ceased to hope for success. (Scott, *Talisman* 50; ch. 6 [1])

Red-Crosse Knight Sir Kenneth is a detached warrior who muses over his companions laying siege to Muslim villages just for their riches. King Richard I believes he is the leader of all and has the authority to command them while his companions – King Philip of France and the Duke of Austria - become rivals behind his back. Scottish knights are tented separately while all of them equally hate the Saracens, though Saladin helps them on many accounts. Africans are considered slaves as is the case with the Nubian Zohauk. Saladin identifies Kenneth as a Frank, one of the earlier fighters from Outremer who were nothing but plundering drunkards. The Crusades were extremely expensive wars estimated at a cost of "1,537,570 livres or more than six times his annual income" (Riley-Smith 44 [2]) and the poor subjects had to pay the Saladin Tithe and separate deposits to the church.

Chivalry was not a set of golden rules that saved lives and made people courteous. There was no courtesy in war. Theodorick of Engaddi is an ape-like priest who guards the True Cross in his cave. He was once a proud Templar who now lashes himself every night and repents for his heinous crimes as a chivalrous knight. Chivalry does not permit Sir Kenneth to rejoin his army when he is sold as a slave by Richard I to El Hakim, the physician. Chivalry does not unite knights from various countries in a common cause but arouses jealousy and the greed to occupy Saladin's lands and steal away his wealth. As these thoughts grow deeper, the triumvirate of European powers forgot about the True Cross and concentrated only on grabbing Saladin's riches. They wanted colonies of their own to provide their homelands with an unending trade and cheap labour: "In the middle of the thirteenth century the influential canon lawyer Hostiensis believed that Christendom had an intrinsic right to extend its sovereignty over any society which did not recognize the rule of the Roman Church or Roman Empire" (Riley-Smith 9-10 [2]).

Prince Saladin colligates the narrative and the other historical objects through his varied disguises and skills. He is revealed as a better ruler than the European princes. He does not cure Richard I out of friendship but to set the European princes against each other. At the end of the tale, Richard agrees, as he leaves Jerusalem, that the



Holy Sepulchre is in better hands than any of the European powers. Kenneth is not a pure man, though he is the hero and a Templar with a Red-Cross. He ignores his duties and goes to catch a glimpse of Edith which causes a whole lot of trouble for his monarch. He considers all Saracens as infidels and enemies. He gets into a fight with Saladin/Hakim right in the first page just because he is an infidel. Being terrified of dwarves in the cave of Theodorick, he leaves the area after delivering the scroll to the ape as soon as possible.

The Crusades are chosen by Scott as his historical field with racism, feudalism, taxation and oppression being the dominant themes revealed through historical analysis. However, the fields of Ken Follett, the master of modern historical narratives, are quite different. They go onto a whole other level exposing private feuds behind world wars and what really happened on the battlefield. If Scott selected the romantic-satiric mode of storytelling, Follett prefers realism to the core. There is nothing romantic when he mentions crystal chandeliers and silver tableware of the aristocrats but plain dark realism in these being used by selfish people to plan a war for their own selfish reasons. Realism is the blood of the innocents that is shed for some useless politician planning war behind a glass cabinet or the last memories as they flash by when a shell blasts off hundreds in the battlefields. Follett's pages overflow with historical realism, which is a rare thing in a historical writer.

The Great War or World War I, "the mutual butchery of civilized nations" (McDonough 21 [3]), exterminated half of the world's best young soldiers and more than half of the world's innocent civilians just to satisfy a handful of greedy men who were safe behind their desks in spotless offices of war. *Fall of Giants* (2010), set in Britain, Germany, the United States, Paris, Russia and the battlefronts of these states is an unending chronicle of the economic and political devastation of Europe. As Follett estimates the cost through the words of Bernie, "The war costs five million pounds a day. That's ten times the normal cost of running the country" (*Giants* 590; ch. 20 [4]). There was chronic food shortage in most of Europe and Russia. The United States entered the war to emerge as a superpower when Germany was gaining grounds. When the Treaty of Versailles is to be signed, Follett cunningly exposes the selfishness and the necessity to tumble Germany down. Things would have been the same for any other country if she had aspired to be the superpower. The Treaty did more harm to Bosnia and Serbia than the Ottoman rule or the rule of Franz Ferdinand because these cities were carved up based on racism into Czechoslovakia.

Follett presents a gala dinner scene in the aristocratic country estate Tŷ Gwynn of Earl Fitzherbert where the guests – most of them war captains, politicians and noblemen – speak about Germany's sudden development and are afraid of the country gaining the upper hand. The jealous politicians unknowingly declare war against Germany over a dinner party when they want to be the dominant powers. Halfway through the war, the Allied Powers began eyeing the colonies and resources of the Central Powers. Colonies in the diamond fetching lands of South Africa, coal and iron ore zones of Germany's coastal villages and the industrial areas of Germany caught the eye of many a giant. The Allies continued the war for these precious resources when they could have stopped years before:



Our empire holds sway over more than four hundred million people. Hardly any of them are entitled to vote. They have no control over their own countries. Ask the average British man why, and he'll say it's our destiny to govern inferior peoples . . . Billy boy, it's not the Germans who think they should rule the world – it's us! (Follett, *Giants* 491; ch. 16 [4])

Corruption was a by-product of World War I. The Conservatives bribed the enemy to leave their estates safe from shell-fire. Russian soldiers received poor fare because their generals sold quality goods to the enemy. These poor starving men often surrendered to the enemy for a meal or a bottle of schnapps. And they were shot by their own commanders if they ran away from enemy fire. The French mutinied against their commanders in the Nivelle Offensive because of stringent laws and starvation. The media was controlled by Conservative politicians and the papers printed nothing but lies. British papers egged the citizens to smash German shops by printing false articles that Great Britain was full of German spies. MI6 was established to decode German messages and Fitz worked for them betraying his German relatives. As the war progressed, MI6 decoded American and Russian messages as well – the secrets of Britain's allies. The colonized were forced to fight the war of their colonial masters. Indian soldiers were chosen for their expertise in hand grenades for the Battle of Marne.

The war was a great business opportunity for many like the Vyalov family. Textile, especially uniform sewing, iron, tobacco and coal industries and nightclubs flourished in the wake of death and destruction. Innocent American tourists sunk by German U-boats were no concern of President Woodrow Wilson. He waited for the opportune moment to make the maximum out of another's war. The United States was the creditor of Britain, France and Italy but not Germany because she was fast developing and a threat to the giant. While the US was on to German resources, Britain was secretly grabbing Siberian oil in the name of acquiring remaining weapons. The Allies were not willing to give independence to their colonies and Wilson's Fourteen Points became a voice in the wilderness. The Treaty of Versailles was completely different from the Fourteen Points. June 28, 1919 was the ill-fated day when Germany stepped down from the throne of dominance and handed over everything to the Allies. Africa and China did not agree to the demands. Mob violence broke out in Russia and the Bolsheviks became the new Mensheviks.

Both *The Talisman* and *Fall of Giants* are about unnecessary wars initiated to disguise the grabbing of resources and colonies in foreign lands to feed homeland trade and industries. Though written centuries apart in different styles and modes, they stand apart as milestones in the never-ending roads of history silently reminding readers that nothing has changed in the pages of history:

all apparent communities are delusions; all pretense of love is a fraud; all apparent progress in the creation of manifestly more human understanding is sheer myth . . . man's separation from man is grounded in the ontological bases of nature itself, and is therefore intrinsic to society . . . (White 239 [5])

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The idea of employing various historical fields and objects is to point out that the victims of history are the producers while those who manipulate history itself are the superstructure. The timelines of history implemented by these writers expose that history repeats itself with different fields and objects. Scott and Follett remind the readers and re-readers that the past reflects the present and lays down the future.

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