

## Wilbur Smith's War Cry as Intellectual History

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### ABSTRACT

*The authenticity of historical narratives has always been questioned but the genre has existed from 2000 BC and thrives today as one of the best sources of entertainment in print and media. The genre is born when philosophical and theological disputes arise to preserve a particular culture or belief. Such Intellectual histories have structures of their own and they have contributed to the restructuring of the historical field. This paper analyses this Intellectual history and its parameters, revealing how truth is hidden in fiction while history itself is contorted to suit political ideals.*

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Historical narratives have entertained generations of readers and re-readers with their tales of heroes and legends, partly real and partly fictional, but the history in each of these conveys a lot of information about the culture of the people in that time and their beliefs, rituals and most importantly, their voices. *The Gilgamesh Epic* written about 2000 BC, the first extant piece of literature to be recorded and therefore, the first historical narrative is an example of Sumerian culture, religion and the rebellion of the people against a selfish and cruel tyrant. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are meta-narratives on war and the utterly selfish desires of one man and how that could lead to the destruction of a whole civilization. Yet they are encomiums of Greek culture and the writer's laments of the loss of such times.

The structure and content of historical narratives have changed with the times and tastes of the people. From the great epics of the past, they have traversed through the evolving forms of narrative poetry, especially in the border ballads, drama and into novels in the late seventeenth century. Narrative poems like Lord Byron's *Don Juan* and Gothic thrillers like Bram Stoker's *Dracula* are all variants of historical narrative. Shakespeare's history and Roman plays, Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are all historical. The structure for historical fiction, established by Sir Walter Scott, the Father of the genre and the pioneer who has authored more than thirty-two novels and many historical poems, is followed by most writers of the genre to this day.

World Wars and economic depressions have drastically changed the structure of historical narratives. Slavery, feminism, the rise of postmodernism and the avant garde have all aided the historical narrative on its Road to Damascus. Histories have blended with culture theories, orientalism, feminism, symbolism, existentialism and

structuralism to produce works like Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Remains of the Day* and Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*. Historical theorists change the game with new theories: the artefacts of Keith Jenkins, deconstructionist approach to narratives framed by Alun Munslow, Rosenstone's relationship between history and media and Louis Mink's linguistic turn to history. After the advent of these theories, historical writers begin to contest history itself. 21<sup>st</sup> century writers like Hilary Mantel, Ken Follett, Anthony Doerr, Markus Zusak, Elizabeth Kostova and Wilbur Smith start to question the authenticity of history and expose truth in fiction after intensive research.

Hayden White, American historian and theorist, introduces the idea of explaining a narrative through argument, emplotment and ideological implication in his *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination of Nineteenth Century Europe* (2014). He believes that the centre of meaning changes based on the historical field or setting and the objects or historical characters. Influenced by Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and Friedrich Nietzsche, he ventures to expose the truth in fiction hinted at by writers. This paper is an analysis of Intellectual history, one of the functional elements of Metahistory, in Wilbur Addison Smith's *War Cry* (2017). Wilbur Addison Smith achieved fame through his Egyptian series but his World War narratives mapped in The Courtney series are his masterpieces. The series opens with *When the Lion Feeds* and culminates in *War Cry*, weaving the field of the World Wars among subtle and adventurous characters who stand out as ordinary men rather than some legendary demigod or hero as in his Egyptian series.

*War Cry* is set in Africa, England and Germany, all hotspots during World War II. The plot opens with the shooting down of the zeppelin *Assegai* by Leon Courtney, a British soldier two months after World War I. Leon settles down in Africa as a businessman with the gold in the zeppelin. Young Saffron Courtney learns to ride and hunt among Masai warriors, ignorant of the past that lies waiting for her. Years later, she falls in love with Gerhard von Meerbach, a German when Britain and Germany are rivals during World War II. But that is not the catch. Meerbach is the son of Graff, the German aide shot down by Leon. The worst detail of all is that Graff had been seduced by Eva, a British spy who posed as a German in revenge for her parents. Eva was Leon's wife and Saffron learns the dirty secret after her mother's death. The Courtneys and the Meerbachs are not only national enemies but blood rivals as well.

Saffron Courtney becomes an Oxford scholar much against the wishes of Leon because Oxford men did not fight for their country. She is marked down just like her mother because of her extraordinary skills and remarkable beauty. Being an exceptional student of politics, she masters diplomacy and tactics. She is an expert markswoman and a great rider. A British aide follows her everywhere trying to recruit her as a spy. All the while, poor Gerhard is robbed of his inheritance by his elder brother Konrad. Meerbach Motor Works is cleansed of all Jews, Communists and other undesirable races: "Who else but a company cleansed of Jews and commies and perverts, a company whose loyalty to the party is unquestioned . . ." (Smith 119 [1]). Gerhard's dream of becoming an architect is ruined because art schools in Germany are run by anti-Nazis. He is forced by

the Gestapo to become a Luftwaffe pilot and swears loyalty to the Führer. It is like selling his soul to the devil. Smith's comments on the operations of the Gestapo are remarkable indeed:

There are barely five hundred Gestapo officers in all Berlin. But then again, there are also four million. That is the genius of the system. Everyone watches everyone else. Everyone is a policeman. You have no idea how much information is brought to our attention every day. So many people reporting so many neighbours, workmates, friends, even family members. (182 [1])

Gerhard and his mother Athala condemn the actions of Hitler who repudiates the Treaty of Versailles. Saffron suffers under similar circumstances in Oswald Mosley's fascist regime in Britain. After the invasion of Poland and the retreat at Dunkirk, Gerhard hears news of brand new gas chambers and vans to kill Jews, senile people and disabled children. The Kaiser's Coffee Company van is another of Hitler's brilliant inventions to gas "imbeciles, inmates of mental asylums and so forth as part of the euthanasia programme" because these people "are using up resources that could be put to better use elsewhere" (Smith 389 [1]).

When Saffron takes the Cresta Run in Switzerland, she meets Gerhard for the first time. They set up a secret way of communication through friends and trusted relatives but nothing stays secret in the reign of the Gestapo. Frank Courtney, Leon's brother teams up with Hassan al-Banna of the Muslim Brotherhood to crush the rebels in Germany. The Arabs and Jews in Palestine support Hitler with funds and arms because they did not want refugees. When Saffron is led to believe that Gerhard is dead, she joins the MTC as a trained chauffeur and drives British generals around battlefronts. Gerhard is alive and part of the blitzkrieg, flying over horrors etched into history forever:

It was filled with dead bodies, presumably of Jews, piled so high now that they were almost spilling over the top . . . Then he saw SS men – one for every Jew – put pistols to their heads, fire and blow them into the ravine with the force of the bullet smashing into their skulls. (Smith 498 [1])

The narrative ends with the secret transportation of the British gold reserves in Greece aboard the *Star of Khartoum*, a civilian vessel owned by Leon. Saffron is the dispatch of the bank but the ship is shot down by the German Luftwaffe lead by Gerhard. Saffron and her wounded father are applauded by the whole country for their courage but learn that they were just a decoy. The gold had been transported many days before. Saffron accepts to be part of Dalton's Special Operations Executive as a saboteur and is taken in by Mr. Brown, the same man who recruited her mother years ago. The tale ends with a dejected Saffron standing before the oracle Lusima who prophesies blood, death and loss in a desolate future.

Hayden White defines Intellectual History as "the attempt to write the history of consciousness-in-general" (80, ch. 5 [2]). Histories of consciousness are records of failures of the fields and objects. None of the objects and characters achieves their ambitions because of the flawed structure they live in. Saffron Courtney, a heroic woman gifted with many skills, lives a depressed life as a chauffeur while Gerhard has to be content flying

around in a plane. They are constantly under surveillance by agents like Mr. Brown and the Gestapo. Intellectual history has its origins in the theological and philosophical disputes during the first Council of Nicaea convened by Constantine to put down disputes regarding Christianity. Historical narrative is born when these disputes are recorded in different genres of literary writings. Culture has evolved as a product of historical consciousness. Constantine, Caesar, Hitler – all of them have acted to preserve their culture and beliefs they hold most dear. This results in the breaking down of the historical structure:

Histories of consciousness inevitably take on the aspect of chronicles of frustrated hopes, unrealized plans, or unfounded aspirations . . . substitutes for the color of the marketplace, the battlefield, and the parliament, the odor of the study, the library and the academic hall . . . (White 82, ch. 5 [2])

These men are interested in transforming their world but not their positions. The historical writer, in this scenario, operates from the reader's corpus of existing knowledge, thereby creating what White terms "successive approximation" (89 [2]) resulting in facts becoming explicit when read in-between the lines. The totality of experience in *War Cry* is a consequence of objects like Hitler and Mosley related comprehensively to the field of World War II, trenches, battlefields, air raids and the suffering of the people. The structure expands from narrative to society, from battlefield to home and from words into thoughts.

### **Works Cited**

[1] Smith, Wilbur. *War Cry*. Harper Collins, 2017.

[2] White, Hayden. *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature and Theory*. Johns Hopkins, 2010.