

CAM BRIDGE RELITERARY VIEW.

Citation Info

Rebecca Stott, 'Tangling with History', *Cambridge Literary Review*, 1/1 (Michaelmas, 2009), pp. 263–8.

Copyright Info

All contents are copyright © 2010 by Cambridge Literary Review.
Rightsvert to authors on publication.

Rebecca Stott

Tangling with History

ISAAC NEWTON BOUGHT A GLASS PRISM at a stall at Stourbridge Fair in August 1665, probably on or close to the spot where mechanics now fit replacement windscreen wipers or exhausts onto Renault cars in the garage on Mercer's Row. It was a three-sided wedge of glass about eight inches long. Determined to discover the physics of colour, the reclusive student had started a series of experiments with light in his rooms in Trinity. To buy the prism, he'd almost certainly walked to Stourbridge Common, along a path that the Newmarket Road follows now, with questions lurching around in his head, his eyes still sore from the series of optical experiments he'd already begun. Over the following year, the prism that he bought that day, and others he bought later, helped him to work out what the painters in Delft were also discovering in other ways at the same time—that white light was not pure, but was made up of colour. In the event, few people cared much, for England was in the grip of plague, but it would come to matter a great deal later.

When I began a historical novel about Newton five years ago, I knew that much about the young student and his piece of glass and no more. Several parts of the historical record were missing or contradictory. Newton tells us, for instance, that he bought the prism at Stourbridge Fair in 1665 but the town records tell us the fair was cancelled that year because of the plague. There were numerous holes in the historical and biographical accounts. There were many tantalising unknowns. Looking at Newton's prism in the glass case in the Whipple Museum, I found its provenance, or lack of provenance, hauntingly poignant. Where was it made and by which glassmaker, using which method? How did it get to Stourbridge in 1665? I didn't really *need* to know where it came from, not in order to write the chapters of the novel I wanted to write about the glass, but somehow it had started to matter.

By the end of a month spent in Cambridge University Library I had got

to the end of what was known about glassmaking in the seventeenth century. It made quite a story. Glassmaking practices, akin to alchemy, were top secret. Those secrets were stolen and traded across Europe. Since the end of the civil war the English glassmaking industry had been re-established through a series of monopolies secured with royal favours by the unscrupulous Duke of Buckingham. By 1665, imported Venetian glass had been banned so getting hold of it through the black market was dangerous. People died for glassmaking secrets. But still, even at this point, knowing all that I did about seventeenth-century glassmaking, the prism remained silent about its origin.

The glass was only one thread of a web of history I was trying to put together around Newton for the novel. The threads that made up that tangle of histories—alchemy, plague, glassmaking, college politics and scientific networks—were all inseparable. Over and over again, I kept coming to the end of the archives. I'd write to historians and they'd confirm that I had read everything there was to know. *Where do you go as a historian*, I wrote in a notebook, full of jottings about glassmaking and alchemy, *when the archives come to an end?* What do you do when you come to the end of what is footnotably knowable? Where does speculation become justifiable?

The novelist A. S. Byatt, in a series of essays called *On Histories and Stories* published in 2000, writes about these seductive unknowns. She suggests that the proliferation of historical novels over the last fifty years has been stimulated by a rise in self-consciousness in historical practice. The more we take for granted that we cannot know the past, she writes, the more we tell ourselves it is another country, the more we reiterate the anxiety that ideology blinds, that all interpretations are provisional and that therefore any interpretation is as good as any other; the more we tell ourselves that history is a form of the sublime, the past becomes something to be approached but never reached, increasingly desired but impossible to touch. It is this sense of epistemological unease, Byatt argues (a compulsion to know the past that springs from a sense of the impossibility of that knowing), that provides the key to the flowering of the historical novel in the last fifty years.

Can a novel be a contribution to historical knowledge in any meaningful sense? What might a historical novel *know* that a history book might not know if both writers are working with the same materials, if both stand there peering into the void, into what is unknowable? Is there any advantage that historical fiction might have over a history book in providing knowledge of the past? And, though it might be all very well to write a fictional story about the origins of an important piece of seventeenth-century glass or to speculate for fictional ends on Newton's relationship with a certain "Mr F" inscribed in his journal, how do you begin to speculate on why Newton wrote a list of 48 sins in a secret code in a notebook written in 1662? What might Newton have *felt* about risking the streets of Cambridge during a plague summer?

Walter Scott, the so-called father of the historical novel, would have had some answers to those questions. He'd have something to say about how the historical novel can reveal, dramatise and embody social, ideological and political forces in conflict and in development at a particular moment in time. If the opinions expressed in *Waverley* are anything to go by, Scott also believed that passions are universal and transhistorical and that the job of the historical novelist is to show our emotional kinship with our ancestors. George Eliot and Charles Dickens would be with Scott on the transhistorical nature of human emotion. You only have to read the opening chapters of George Eliot's *Romola* and Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* to see that.

Personally, it's the opportunity to *tangle* history that I find seductive in writing historical fiction. When I began to experiment with the edges of fact and fiction seven years ago, it was to write a book on Darwin's eight-year barnacle research, commissioned as a 'cross-over' book by Faber. Writing about, even reconstructing, feeling was central to the book because I was writing about not just Darwin's intellectual but his emotional transformation within a short time frame (1846–54). I was lucky. Darwin left so much material: journals, diaries, notes and letters so I had a rich emotional history at my fingertips. His copious and delightful letters show that his head was full of tangled things. He was always thinking about several things at once—his children, their

schooling, the revolutions in Europe, the famine in Ireland, the water tanks at the bottom of the garden, the flight paths of bees. I had to follow him there into that tangle, see the imaginative connections he might have made or felt, try to read everything he had read. Natalie Zemon Davis has coined the term ‘braided history’ to describe what she does in uncovering cultural connections and networks, but I knew I had to reach for something much more tangled in weaving this material around Darwin.

More than anything, I think, following Darwin into those eight obsessive years, by reading every letter he wrote and every book he read, I came to an understanding of the way in which his emotional response to his idea of species change was both socially and culturally determined and specific to him. For me one of the drives of writing historical fiction or historical non-fiction is to establish, or try to establish, *emotional specificity*, not just of individuals but of groups, particularly in relation to the history of ideas. I didn’t begin with Scott’s presumption that all emotions are the same, regardless of time and place. But like Scott I have become interested in exploring the past by putting fictionalised characters into it and seeing what happens to them, seeing how they react. In *Waverley* Scott sends a young and hopelessly romantic young English man to Scotland to see what he will feel and think as he encounters articulate lowlanders and then passionate highlanders and gets caught up in the Jacobite uprising. Edward Waverley’s allegiances shift as he makes new relationships and as new conversations open. As Waverley wavers between allegiances, we as readers are presented with an ideological and emotional portrait of tensions, rivalries, and motivations. History, for Scott, is dialogue and dialectic.

Whilst historians might be reluctant to speculate about what-might-have-been or might-have-been-felt, a historical novelist is less restricted. I had been writing a history of the migration of evolutionary ideas across Europe in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries for some years. Two years ago, in the midst of that research, I began to wonder what it might have felt like to be a woman in this history—a woman with serious evolutionary ideas. And whilst the what-if might be the concern of the

historical novelist, it shouldn't really be the concern of the historian. So an idea for a novel ambushed the history I was writing. I began to write what would become *The Coral Thief*. I put five fictionalised thieves into Paris just after Waterloo and gave them a museum to break into. One of the thieves, the narrator, Daniel Connor, is a young medical student from Edinburgh who arrives in Paris to study anatomy and falls in amongst these thieves, who are also early evolutionists—Lamarkians—and political radicals. The leader of the thieves is a woman who passes as a man; she is also a serious and radical evolutionist. I wanted to know what he would do and feel, not only to be in Paris, abroad for the first time, but also aroused by infidels and by heretical atheistic ideas. I also wanted to know how *she*, my philosopher thief, had *come to be*. So did he.

Fiction is, of course, valuable historical source material for the historical novelist. Where do I begin to look for source materials for reconstructing the feelings of a young medical student such as Daniel Connor? History books, yes, and conduct books written for young doctors in Paris, and journals written by them, but also novels and poetry. For an emotionally sophisticated account of a man abroad, culturally and aesthetically overwhelmed, oscillating between puritanism and hedonism, I re-read Clough's *Amours de Voyage*. For a man looking for lost origins, I re-read *Daniel Deronda* and for the back story of a doctor trained in post-revolutionary Paris, *Middlemarch*. For a sense of the excitement and terror of Paris I read Wordsworth's *The Prelude*. For a young man haunted by evolutionary imaginings I read Kingsley's *Alton Locke*. For the corruptions of Paris in the Bourbon Restoration, Balzac's *Pere Goriot*. For the struggle to make sense of evolutionary ideas I read *In Memoriam*.

A. S. Byatt described the process of writing her two historical novellas *The Conjugal Angel* and *Morpho Eugenia*. She writes about the intensity of feeling in her investigation, the desire to know, to touch, to reach out, that characterised her extensive reading of Tennyson's letters, *In Memoriam*, Swedenborg and Hallam's writings. She wrote:

I do not think I would have made many of the connections
I made between Hallam's aesthetics, his theology, Emily's

Swedenborgianism, the sociology of spiritualism, body and soul, by thinking in an orthodox scholarly way—or, for that matter in a deliberately unorthodox scholarly way [...]. The direction of my research was wayward and precise simultaneously. And the combination of the pursuit of the excluded Emily and the attempt to understand the ideas and images of the two young men, did, I think, change my ideas about love and death in Victorian life and literature. [...] I found, as I went on reading, that I was feeling out, or understanding, the Victorian fear that we are our bodies, and that, after death, all that occurs is natural mouldering.

It is precisely that tangle of interconnected, mutually-dependent ideas and feelings in the past, reached through both authorial waywardness and precision, that historical fiction can perhaps reach for. And I mean tangle here in the way Darwin uses it in his famous entangled bank passage, the conclusion to the *Origin*:

It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us.

Writing history as tangle or web, as the historical novel can do, might give us alternative ways of knowing or understanding the past or, as Byatt puts it, a way of ‘feeling out’ historical moments. It may not be any more ‘true’ than a history book, but it might not be less so either.

Author Info

Rebecca Stott is a novelist, academic and radio broadcaster. She is an affiliated scholar at the Department of the History and Philosophy of Science at Cambridge and Professor of English Literature and Creative Writing at UEA. She is the author of the biography *Darwin and the Barnacle* and two historical novels *Ghostwalk* and *The Coral Thief*. She lives in Cambridge.

cambridgeliteraryreview.org