Guy Vanderhaeghe

2008 *Trudeau Fellow,* St. Thomas More College,
University of Saskatchewan

BIOGRAPHY

Guy Vanderhaeghe is the author of four novels, three collections of short stories, and two plays. His first collection of short stories, *Man Descending,* won the Governor's General Award for fiction and the Faber Prize in Great Britain. His novel *Homesick* was a co-winner of the 1990 City of Toronto Book Award. In 1993, he received the Canadian Authors Association Award for Drama for *I Had a Job I Liked. Once*, and in 1996 his novel *The Englishman's Boy* won the Governor's General Award for Fiction and was short-listed for both the Giller Prize and the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. Published in 2002, Vanderhaeghe's novel *The Last Crossing* won CBC's Canada Reads, three Saskatchewan Books Awards, and the Canadian Booksellers Association Libris Prize for Fiction Book of the Year. It was also a selection of the British Broadcasting Corporation's television program "Page Turners." His latest work was a two-part dramatization of *The Englishman's Boy*, which appeared on CBC television in March of 2008.

Guy Vanderhaeghe has received both the Harbourfront Literary Prize and the Timothy Findley Prize, given as recognition for a body of work. He is an Officer of the Order of Canada, a Member of the Saskatchewan Order of Merit, and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. He was nominated a Trudeau Fellow in 2008. In 2009, he received the Distinguished Canadian Award presented by the Seniors' University Group and the Seniors Education Centre of the University of Regina.

He has taught creative writing at the University of Ottawa and St. Thomas More College, as well as at a number of other writing

programs, among them the Humber School for Writers, Booming Ground, the Sage Hill Writing Experience, and the Writing Program of the Banff Centre for the Arts.

Guy Vanderhaeghe received an Honours BA and MA in history from the University of Saskatchewan, and a BEd from the University of Regina. Currently, he is the St. Thomas More Scholar at St.Thomas More College, University of Saskatchewan.

ABSTRACT

In the past 20 years, the historical novel has achieved popular success in English-speaking Canada and recognition by many prize-giving juries. Its prominence has sometimes caused consternation among academic historians who view it as "bad history," a distortion and vulgarization of our knowledge of the past, while in some literary circles it is dismissed as mere nostalgic whimsy, a refusal to engage with, or even recognize, the present reality of Canada today. As someone who once aspired to be a professional historian and who now writes historical novels, I have found myself confronting some of these issues and trying to resolve them as a practitioner of the form. If the historical novel is an awkward centaur (both fiction and history), on what terms ought it be judged? Does the "subjectivity" of the historian differ from that of the novelist? Do fundamental and important distinctions exist in the way historians and novelists construct narratives? Is the historical novel really an examination of the past, or an oblique look at the present? What practical strategies do historical novelists pursue in an attempt to resolve these quandaries? Finally, if the historical novel has a role in the apprehension of the past, what is it?

LECTURE

Apprehending the Past: History Versus the Historical Novel

University of New Brunswick

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To the scholars reading this text, I would like to begin with a disclaimer: I make no pretence of scholarship. Most of my adult life has been passed writing fiction and teaching creative writing—occupations not noted for their theoretical or analytical rigour. I am neither a literature nor a history specialist. In fact, this is the first time in 35 years that I have felt myself obliged to dangle a citation in a text.

Although there was a time when I harboured ambitions to become an academic historian, I soon learned I was no fit player for the game and consigned myself to the sidelines. Nevertheless, clear of the action, I did remain an interested observer of the writing of history in English-speaking Canada and, with time, I came to write historical novels. Much of what I have to say is informed by my experiences as a working writer, the uneasy compromises and accommodations involved in my attempts to apprehend the past in fiction. And I use the word "apprehend" in its several senses: to take into custody, to understand, and, at least in my case, to approach with anxiety. I am an amateur painting in broad strokes, wielding a brush on a canvas that is hotly contested ground.

In *The Uses and Abuses of History*, Margaret MacMillan remarks, "History, and not necessarily the sort that professional historians are

doing, is widely popular these days, even in North America where we have tended to look toward the future rather than the past."[1] The current public appetite for popular histories, historical novels, historical films—even the existence of the History Channel, an entire television network devoted to the past—gives credence to this assertion. But this current enthusiasm appears to have disquieted academic historians, left them feeling that in the battle for hearts and minds they are losing ground. While attending historical conferences and in private conversations with historians, I have frequently heard uneasiness expressed about their declining influence and the invasion of their territory by unqualified interlopers.

The historian J.L. Granatstein, not a man inclined to mince words, attributes this failure to the profession itself. In his polemic *Who Killed Canadian History?* he savages his colleagues for preferring "to remain alone in their specialists' cubbyholes, rather than to reach out and treat subjects that tell Canadian students and citizens who they are, where they have come from, and where they are going."[2] It is his caustic judgment that

> The vast majority of scholarly books are destined to remain unread on university library shelves. How long the university presses, which operate with the assistance of public funds, can keep on printing such dogs is unclear; if the subsidies disappear, as they probably will, these scholarly publishers will have to adapt or die. Whether academic writers can change enough to reach readers, whether they want to, is uncertain.
>
> The point is not that scholarly publishing is unnecessary. It is vitally necessary that research into our past and present be undertaken in the universities. However, one may legitimately question the use of public funds to publish books whose only true value is to secure tenure or promotion in the universities for the authors. The

1. Margaret MacMillan, *The Uses and Abuses of History* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2008), 3.

2. J. L. Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History?* (Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers, Ltd. 1998), 71-72.

> unreadable sludge could be circulated to the three interested readers in *samizdat* form or made available on the Internet.[3]

Margaret MacMillan, in a gentler, softer tone, urges historians to strive to make their work intelligible to the general reader, because

> Already much of the history that the public reads and enjoys is written by amateur historians. Some of it is very good, but much is not. Bad history tells only part of complex stories. It claims knowledge which it could not possibly have, as when, for example, it purports to give the unspoken thoughts of its characters. It makes sweeping generalizations for which there is not adequate evidence and ignores awkward facts which do not fit. It demands too much of its protagonists, as when it expects them to have had insights or made decisions they could not possibly have done. The lessons such history teaches are too simple or simply wrong.[4]

From the professional historian's viewpoint this is an instance of Gresham's Law at work: bad currency pushing out good coin of the realm. Like MacMillan, Granatstein too harbours misgivings about some popular history, fiercely attacking what he characterizes as gross distortions of the historical record. Brian and Terence McKenna's television documentary *The Valour and the Horror*, which outraged many veterans by its depiction of the Allied bombing campaign against Germany in World War II, prompted Granatstein to castigate the production as "a perversion of reality, a misreading of history through lenses tinted pink in the aftermath of Vietnam anti-war sentimentality."[5]

I do not mean to leave the impression that professional historians uniformly accept MacMillan's and Granatstein's views about what historical writing is, or should be. Many working in areas such as the history of women, gays and lesbians, ethnic minorities, Aboriginal peoples, organized labour and so on, a plethora of topics that were

3. Ibid., 75.
4. MacMillan, *Uses et Abuses*, 36.
5. Granatstein, *Who killed Canadian History?*, 117.

scarcely studied in the history department from which I graduated nearly 40 years ago, would take issue with their positions. I have neither the time nor the expertise to outline or weigh the merits of the respective positions, only to note that if they agree on little else, historians do seem to agree that trespassers are overrunning the manor.

The usual suspects, journalists turned historians such as Pierre Berton, Peter C. Newman, Richard Gwynn, and Maggie Siggins, have lately been joined by a new wave of invaders. The last 20 years has seen an explosion of historical fiction that has both enjoyed a remarkable popular success and won many of English-speaking Canada's major literary prizes. Michael Ondaatje's *The Skin of the Lion* and *The English Patient*, Jane Urquhart's *Away*, Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*, Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces*, Wayne Johnston's *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, Rudy Wiebe's *A Discovery of Strangers*, Michael Crummey's *River Thieves*, Fred Stenson's *The Trade*, Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road*, Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes* represent only the tip of a formidable iceberg.

And if popular historians transgress in the ways MacMillan charges, writers of fiction sin even more egregiously, blithely pronounce the unspoken thoughts of historical characters, and cavalierly ignore awkward facts or interpret them in ways a historian would never countenance. In the opinion of many historians, writers of historical fiction are nothing but magpies that pick up all the shiny, entertaining bits from the past, tart them up even more, and pass off their gaudy, cheap trinkets on an unsuspecting public. In prickly self-defence, historical novelists are likely to retort that the autopsies academic historians perform on the past drain all the blood from it; it's little wonder that the public recoils from the grey, grinning, lifeless corpse they lay out on the morgue slab to be admired.

Of Hedgehogs and Foxes

Admittedly, these are caricatures, but like editorial cartoons often do, they capture a little truth. What they do not reveal is that the

writing of history and the writing of historical fiction are different and distinct endeavours. Primarily, two things separate historians and historical novelists: the character of the gaze they turn upon the past, and the narrative methods they employ to express that gaze as it is constructed and represented by words.

In his famous essay on Tolstoy, "The Hedgehog and the Fox," Isaiah Berlin uses the Greek poet Archilocus' observation that "the fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing"[6] as his way of drawing a distinction between different sorts of writers and thinkers. Hedgehogs incline to "one system less or more coherent or articulate…," while foxes "pursue many ends, often unrelated and contradictory, connected if at all, only in some *de facto* way…".[7]

I take licence here with Berlin's formulation, since he also applies it to writers of fiction, but I would like to suggest that novelists, when compared to historians, are temperamentally more fox-like, more likely to be leery of systems coherent and articulate, more comfortable with de facto connections and less at ease with the analysis, synthesis, and interpretation that are the essential tools of historical writing. What initially drew me to the study of history was the wide-ranging and capacious nature of the discipline, how it touches on so many varieties of human experience. Initially, history looked to be the ideal match for someone like me, who had the temperament of a fox, or perhaps, more truthfully, that of a dilettante. History intrigued me because it traversed such a vast, far-flung territory. But what I failed to recognize as a student was that while the *reading* of history is fox-like, the *writing* of history is the province of the hedgehog.

Historical narrative and fictional narrative are polar opposites. The American novelist Wallace Stegner observed this, in speaking

6. Isaiah Berlin, "The Hedgehog and the Fox," in *Russian Thinkers*, eds. Henry Hardy and Aileen Kelly (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982), 22.

7. Ibid.

of his mentor, Bernard DeVoto, a man who wrote both fiction and history,

> A novelist these days is seldom judgmental or omniscient in the historical sense. Benny was much better at the historical judgment, holding a lot of facts in his head, seeing the whole picture, making these pieces fit the picture, and being a kind of god manipulating the machine, than he was at being a ventriloquist and speaking out of a single mouth, or, as he would have to if he were a real fictionist, speaking serially out of many mouths. Faulkner could speak out of any mouth and be absolutely right. That's a major difference between a Benny DeVoto and a Faulkner."[8]

Which is only to say that the tools of production—the narrative stance—inevitably result in different products. My first attempt to write historical fiction was defeated because I could not grasp this rather simple and obvious distinction. In 1982, I began a novel that would eventually appear under the title *The Englishman's Boy*, a book that only saw the light of day 14 years later, an elephantine gestation period. My problem in completing it was that the lingering residue of the historical training I had received as a graduate student was continually at war with my fox-like novelistic impulses. I was constantly interrogating my divided self: What are you up to? What should you be up to? Which master do you serve? History or the novel? It took me a long time to realize that in the case of the term "historical novel," the noun was of greater importance than the adjective, and that a historical novel could never be history but only could be *about* history.

Awareness of the Time Gap

Which raises the question of what makes a novel a historical novel? The simplest and most obvious answer would seem to be that it is a

8. Wallace Stegner and Richard W. Etulain, "The American Literary West," in *Conversations with Wallace Stegner on Western History and Literature* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1983), 134.

novel in which the events related are set in the past. But the passage of time renders all novels historical in that sense, even though they may have turned a relentlessly contemporary eye to the period in which they were composed. In an essay entitled "*The Great Gatsby*? Yes, a Historical Novel," the American historian John Lukacs stated, "It is probably because of the peculiar American, and democratic, structure of history that certain novels tell us more about a certain time and certain people than even the best of histories."[9] True, but what Lukacs is talking about is how a fictional work written in a particular era can be used as a representative document of the mentality of a time, much the way a census roll can tell you something about demographics.

But Fitzgerald did not turn his gaze upon the past; he turned his eye upon the present he was living and observing. The historical novel does the opposite; it reflects, contemplates, and interrogates history from a temporal distance; the gap in time, and the awareness of it, is the significant factor. In some instances, such novels even presume to question the assumptions of the discipline of history itself. What some critics label historiographic metafiction is skeptical about master narratives, the so-called objectivity of history and the coherence of identities, often reconfiguring the past from the point of view of those they consider erased from the historical record or unconscionably neglected by it. The most radical metafictionists go one step further, disrupting chronology, introducing supernatural occurrences and obviously inaccurate elements to illustrate their conviction that history is a relative construct, riddled with subjectivity. Some even refuse to admit any real separation between fiction and history because they contend both are human-made

9. John Lukacs, "*The Great Gatsby?* Yes, a Historical Novel," in *Remembered Past: John Lukacs on History, Historians, and Historical Knowledge. A Reader*, eds. Mark G. Malavasi and Jeffrey Nation (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2005), 721.

ways of "world-making." As Martin Kuester notes in a discussion of George Bowering's historical metafictions, "one might say that the writing of history is history, that history is text rather than facts."[10] Yes, but Kuester's implication appears to be that facts play no role in the construction of the text itself. But facts are the bones and skeleton of historical narrative; everything else is the flesh hung upon them. Like evidence offered in a court of law, the facts presented by historians may be incomplete, flawed, or distorted. Differing interpretations may be drawn from them. But they are subject to inquiry, debate, and scrutiny in the ways novels seldom are or should be. I doubt that any historian would deny that history is in some sense subjective; if memory serves me right, the historian of the Renaissance, Jacob Burkhardt, conceded that point well over a hundred years ago. But to grant an element of subjectivity does not mean that *no* grounds exist for evaluating the "truthfulness" of a work of history; however flawed those tools of evaluation may be, they are essential and necessary. *Mein Kampf* too might be considered a kind of subjective "world-making," but does that mean it is impossible to offer a considered judgment on the validity of its claims?

At the other end of the spectrum sit the more traditional historical novelists. Their ways of apprehending the past are, to a greater or lesser degree, mimetic; they strive to represent history as lived experience. They too, however, have been strongly influenced by many of the concerns of metafictionists, the fluidity of identity, post-colonialism, feminism, and an interest in the recovery of the ignored past. Although history is unlikely to be self-consciously foregrounded in the way metafictionists choose to do, it remains a presence, sometimes even achieves the status of a shadowy character, as it did in the work of 19th century historical novelists such as Leo Tolstoy, of whom the Marxist literary historian Georg Lukacs noted,

10. Martin Kuester, *Framing Truths: Parodic Structures in Contemporary English-Canadian Historical Novels* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 97.

> At the heart of Tolstoy is the contradiction between the protagonists of history and the living forces of popular life. He shows that those who, despite the great events in the forefront of history, go on living their normal, private and egoistic lives are really furthering the true (unconscious, unknown development) while the consciously acting "heroes" of history are ludicrous and harmful puppets.[11]

One can see the same kind of particular, some might say eccentric historical thinking underpinning the work of many historical novelists. The works of Stendhal, Pushkin, Gogol, Balzac, and James Fenimore Cooper all demonstrate highly personal conceptions of what history is and what its meaning is for the present. In the case of Gore Vidal, one of the most prolific American practitioners of the historical novel in the 20th century, his conviction that the United States turned its back on republican virtue for the blandishments of imperial glory is a frequently, almost obsessively reiterated theme, a cry of despair for, if not paradise lost, paradise as missed opportunity.

"The Fictive Dream" to Be Convincing

Nevertheless, what the traditional historical novelist does bears a stronger resemblance to the efforts of historians than the work of the metafictionists, if only because an attempt at mimesis will require research, enough acquaintance with a period to render it in a reasonably satisfying and convincing manner that does not disrupt what John Gardner called "the fictive dream" by committing some anachronistic howler that jolts the reader out of the willing suspension of disbelief. This is at odds with the metafictionists' approach, which wishes to remind readers that they are encountering a text, not a supposed and specious "reality."

The research of traditional historical novelists is often concerned with the texture of the past—what people wore and ate,

11. Georg Lukacs, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1981), 98-99.

how they spoke, what assumptions they shared—but this material is meant to serve artistic aims, and those aims are paramount. To be convincing is more important than to be correct. Strangely enough, the distant past is often less problematic for the writer of historical fiction than a period nearer the present. To state the ludicrously obvious, no reader has any expectation that the characters in Scott's *Ivanhoe* will speak Saxon or French, even though it would be historically accurate if they did. However, the closer one edges to the present, the more likely readers are to expect verisimilitude, and to have opinions about what constitutes a believable representation of the past.

When I was writing *The Englishman's Boy*, part of which takes place in the year 1873, I assumed that by searching written accounts of the period I could find models for a language that would sound "authentic" in the mouths of rural, hardscrabble characters with, at best, a few years of schooling. But when I consulted accounts written by visitors to the West that purported to report the speech of the locals, or read the memoirs composed by traders and frontiersmen who had knocked about in the hinterlands, I grew increasingly dismayed. I offer a brief passage written by L.A. Huffman, who was the post photographer at Fort Keogh, Montana Territory, *circa* 1878, which he offers as an example of the vernacular:

> "Looks like Old Satchel k'ain't have no fun," Andy Williams used to say, "less'n he's sickin' somebody to ride Old Mokey or Zebra, and get k-i-l-l-e-d up. It ain't any of my fambly that's takin' risks that way. I shore have knowed fellers, though, to get a gun bent over their nut for less than loanin' such outlaws to parties with a yearn for this glad life."[12]

Whether this is accurate reporting or whether it relies on the conventions of the dime novels of the Wild West is debatable, but other sources had a uniformly unfortunate tenor. To the

12. L.A. Huffman, "Last Busting at Bow-Gun," in *The Last Best Place: A Montana Anthology*, eds. William Kittredge and Annick Smith (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988), 440.

contemporary ear this sounds like parody, Jed Clampett on *The Beverly Hillbillies,* or something lifted from Mel Brooks's movie *Blazing Saddles*. For a novelist to mimic such speech would raise the spectre of Gabby Hayes spouting comic gibberish on every page. As a literary language it defeats the *illusion* of mimesis, even if it may be more correct than the solution I adopted, which was to invent a language for the character I called The Englishman's Boy, a language owing something to *Huckleberry Finn*, something to the letters and memoirs I had read, with the rest left to pure invention on my part. I had to negotiate, not only with myself, but with the reader's ear. I played fast and loose with what evidence I had at my disposal, the greatest and most unforgiveable sin in a historian.

I grant this is a minor point; I offer it only to exemplify the gulf separating historical novelists and professional historians. For the novelist, what research reveals is not sacred; it is bent to an end. I have always been careful to dispel any notion that I am writing history and have been, perhaps, too eager to confess my sins of omission and commission when it comes to my finagling with the record. Here, I find it necessary to descend into the abyss of personal anecdote to demonstrate the consequences of that. In a talk to the Montana Historical Association I volunteered that while I was aware the latest historical literature puts the number of women raped by wolfers after the Cypress Hills Massacre at between two and four—an event central to my novel *The Englishman's Boy*—I volunteered that I had chosen to depict the rape as inflicted on a single very young girl. After I had finished speaking, a historian rose to charge me with diminishing the atrocity by minimizing the number of Aboriginal women raped.

I did my best to try to explain this was not my intention. The truth was that my novelist's intuition led me to focus all the violence and indignity inherent in an act of rape on one individual because I felt that in doing so, the scene would be more visceral, more repugnant, and more atrociously brutal. I had another motive. I wanted to

use the scene as a spur for The Englishman's Boy to *identify* with the girl's plight, an identification that would be the germ of a guilt that would dog him for the rest of his life, and launch him into action in the sections of the novel set in Hollywood 50 years later. Far from wishing to *diminish* the significance of what was done, I wanted to give it as much weight as I could to heighten the sense of a terrible violation.

For the historian, it was a question of the number of women raped, of quantity; for me, it was a question of the emotional quality of the event and how I could best convey the power it exerted in the life of my protagonist. Perhaps I made the wrong choice, but that was the choice my instincts pushed me towards. It felt right; it felt like what the novel needed and demanded.

The 19th century Italian writer Alessandro Manzoni spent over 20 years wrestling with just this quandary. He hoped to compose a treatise that would point the way to how history and literature could be reconciled in the form of the historical novel. Manzoni is best remembered for his own historical novel, *I promessi sposi*, which first appeared in Italy in 1827 to great acclaim, the publication of which occasioned Goethe to remark that Manzoni's novel suffered from his fastidious attachment to the historical record.[13] This criticism prompted Manzoni to spend the next two decades composing *On the Historical Novel*—a compelling instance of what tender orchids writers are, and how easily they wilt when touched with critical frost.

To his credit, Manzoni's tizzy did not blind his incisive and unflinching mind from recognizing that the historical novel did indeed have a soft underbelly, that historically minded readers would wish to know what was "real" and what was invention, while readers of a literary bent would complain that the aesthetic unity of a work

13. Sandra Berman, introduction to *On the Historical Novel*, by Alessandro Manzoni, trans. and ed. Sandra Berman (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 25.

was damaged if any such revelation was attempted. In Manzoni's words,

> Summing up all these pros and cons, we can, I think, now conclude that both critics are right: both those who want historical reality always to be represented as such and those who want a narrative to produce in its reader a unified belief. But both are wrong in wanting both effects from the historical novel, which the first effect is incompatible with its form, which is narrative, and the second incompatible with its materials, which are heterogeneous. Both critics demand things that are reasonable, even indispensable; but they demand them where they cannot be had.[14]

In the end, Manzoni found the problem philosophically insoluble. The historical novel is an awkward, ungainly species of literature. It is centaur-like because it is neither completely one thing nor the other. For this reason, historians are apt to look at it and declare it is not history. On the other hand, literary scholars have long-harboured suspicions about its hybrid nature and have been reluctant to give it a pass because of its perceived aesthetic failures. A.S. Byatt has said

> During my working life as a writer, the historical novel has been frowned on, and disapproved of, both by academic critics and by reviewers. In the 1950s the word "escapism" was enough to dismiss it, and the idea conjured up cloaks, daggers, crinolined ladies, ripped bodices, sailing ships in bloody battles. It can also be dismissed as "pastoral." My sister, Margaret Drabble, in an address to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, spoke out against the "nostalgia/heritage/fancy dress/costume drama industry." She believes passionately in the novelist's duty to write about the present, to confront an age which is "ugly, incomprehensible, and subject to rapid mutations."[15]

14. Manzoni, *On the Historical Novel*, 72.

15. A.S. Byatt, "Fathers," in *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays* (London: Vintage, 2001), 9.

Historical Novel and National Identity

Which raises a perplexing question, why have so many English-speaking Canadian writers, many of them whose work once was rooted in contemporary experience, embraced a form likely to encounter criticism and disapproval on two fronts, to have their flanks nipped from two sides? Of course, it is impossible to identify any one reason; there are likely to be many. For instance, A.S. Byatt notes that in Britain,

> The journalist Chris Peachman interviewed various novelists about ten years ago about why they were writing historical novels, expecting some answer about paradigms of contemporary reality, and got the same answer from all of them. They wanted to write in a more elaborate, more complex way, in longer sentences, and with more figurative language.[16]

The more pressing reason for the recent adoption of the form in this country may be that the historical novel has always been associated with the assertion and probing of national identity. One can think of Walter Scott's resurrection of Scottish culture and history, Manzoni's radical introduction of Italian peasantry as a subject in *I promessi sposi*, the Ukrainian Gogol's celebration of Cossack life in *Taras Bulba*, or James Fenimore Cooper's search for an essential Americanism in *The Leatherstocking Tales*. For English-speaking Canadians, the definition of identity is *the* perpetual question and anxiety, and the recent rise of the English-speaking historical novel may be just another revisiting of the perennial subject.

Stephen Henighan in his book *When Words Deny the World: The Reshaping of Canadian Writing* attaches this change in literary direction to a precise moment in Canadian political history:

> In a political sense, the collective idea of Canada was demolished on November 21, 1988, when Canadians voted to subordinate our national project to the requirements of continental free trade.

16. Byatt, "True Stories and the Fact in Fiction," in *On Histories*, 95.

> Though we were constantly assured that culture "was off the table", it is obvious that in the absence of some shared national ethos endogenous literature—perhaps all endogenous culture—becomes unsustainable in a medium-sized country speaking two world languages. Richard Gwyn has made the extremely astute observation that while the countries in the 19th century were "nation states," Canada is or was a "state-nation." A state-nation erodes in a neo-liberal, free trade environment: dismantle the state and the nation washes away.[17]

Later in the same book Henighan maintains,

> In retrospect, history seems likely to view the early 1990s as a time of wrenching cultural change, even of collective trauma.
>
> How have our novelists responded to the annihilation of our intimate selves?
>
> Primarily with averted eyes…our most prominent novelists have collaborated in rewriting history as a stately foreign pageant…[18]

This averting of eyes from contemporary events Henighan attributes to a number of factors, and I hope I do not misrepresent his argument by sketching and conflating them. Among the reasons he mentions are that economic globalization increased the cultural power of Toronto, lent even more heft to the influence wielded by its media and its publishing houses, giving rise to something he describes as "TorLit", a phenomenon which supplanted the older regional configuration that produced CanLit. In Henighan's view, Toronto publishers became the gatekeepers to success in the new global literary market, and access to that market was predicated on a number of things. Novelists of contemporary life had to suppress any overt engagement with Canadian social or political issues, which would bewilder foreign readers, and they had to ensure that their

17. Stephen Henighan, "Between Postcolonialism and Globalization," in *When Words Deny the World: The Reshaping of Canadian Writing* (Erin: The Porcupine's Quill, 2002), 99.

18. Henighan, "Free Trade Fiction," in *When Words Deny the World*, 137.

depictions of Canadian life were not too "Canadian." Faced with this choice, he suggests, many retreated, seeking refuge in more commercially viable historical fiction.

Here it is necessary to confess that Henighan uses my own work as providing "an exceptionally graphic chronicle of how one significant Canadian writer began to write more commercial 'literary blockbuster fiction' for the international market," noting that the kind of stories I had published in a book called *Things As They Are?* "had become deeply unfashionable. TorLit critics slammed the book for being everything they no longer wished Canadian writing to be: white, male, rural"—dismissing it because "it was troublingly out of tune with globalized literary taste".[19]

In examining what Henighan has to say, I run the risk of appearing whiny, petulant, and self-serving, but I think it useful to do so because I grant him his insights. With reservations, I agree that the cultural power wielded by Toronto tends to undervalue regional, rural literature, regarding it as an atavism, embarrassingly out of touch with Canada's increasingly urban and multicultural society. And I do believe that for those English-speaking writers who experienced the heady cultural nationalism of the '60s and '70s, NAFTA was a disturbing and ominous sea change, which seemed to mark a profound alteration in the mood of the country, a step back from the cultural and political nationalism that was such a feature of my generation of writers and the slightly older group of novelists, poets, and short story writers in whose steps we walked.

I am sure that younger Canadian writers who have been exposed to Canadian literature in high school and university curricula can scarcely comprehend the excitement I felt reading Atwood, Munro, Richler, Davies, and so on for the first time. An identifiably Canadian setting came as a shock; it was entry into a world familiar but also strangely new, because I had never encountered it in literature. Of

19. Henighan, "Reshaping the Canadian Novel," in *When Words Deny the World*, 192-193.

course, there were English-speaking Canadian writers who had been doing some of the same things before, but not many, and I hadn't been taught them, nor had I stumbled across them on my own. As Robert Kroetsch stated,

> In a new place, and in its literature, the Adamic impulse to give name asserts itself, as it did in the New England of Emerson and Thoreau and Hawthorne. Writers in a new place conceive of themselves profoundly as namers. They name in order to give focus and definition. They name to create boundaries. They name to establish identity.[20]

My feeling when I read these writers was Adamic, a sense of wonder, delight, and surprise that went beyond whatever literary judgment might come into play when I read a British, an American, a French, or a Russian writer. These writers were naming my country. My dim, seemingly unrealizable ambition to become a writer suddenly didn't appear as impossible as it had been before I read *Lives of Girls and Women.*

Creating a Canadian Historical Fiction

So my generation of writers took up the project of naming, of defining our identity as Canadians. This took on a regional and contemporary complexion. There was something naive, hopeful, and fervent, even earnestly and evangelically hortatory about it—fiction as backwoods camp meeting. And its gaze was firmly fixed on the present. Herb Wyile in his book *Speculative Fictions* writes,

> Speaking of the lack of historical fiction during the flourishing of Canadian literature in the 1960s, Margaret Atwood recently observed that the writers of that generation "were instead taken up by the momentous discovery that we ourselves existed, in what was then the here and now, and we were busily exploring the implications of that.[21]

20. Robert Kroetsch, "No Name Is My Name," *The Lovely Treachery of Words: Essays Selected and New* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1989), 41.

21. Herb Wyile, *Speculative Fictions: Contemporary Canadian Novelists and the Writing of History* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), xi.

NAFTA rattled the confidence of a generation of Canadian cultural nationalists. After all, we had teethed on George Grant's *Lament for a Nation.* Whatever NAFTA's merits and demerits as public policy, many writers of my generation were likely to feel it was a renunciation of the desire to frame an English-speaking Canadian identity. For those who saw themselves as contributors to that enterprise, it gave them pause, and, in that pause, I contend some came to see history as playing as large a role in the formation of a Canadian identity as did putting names on a contemporary map of the country. The Canadian past may even have begun to look more distinctly Canadian than the Canada of the present, which was embracing the globalization enterprise and seeming to fold itself more completely into the warm embrace of our neighbour to the south.

What I am talking about is a mood, nothing programmatic. I am speaking about a cohort of aging writers, a cohort more likely to be imbued with a stronger sense and appreciation of the past simply because their own pasts were now of greater extent than they could expect their futures to be, adrift in a present and facing a future they felt vaguely at odds with. This is a hunch, a suspicion. I have not canvassed or surveyed novelists as to their motives for taking up historical fiction; any such questions would likely be greeted with unrestrained hilarity.

Speaking for myself, I certainly did not wake up one morning and say, NAFTA is now a fact! how will I respond? Ah ha; the time has come to take out that historical novel which has been gathering dust in a drawer since 1982 and get back to work on *The Englishman's Boy*. Let me see, it is essential that book be about the birth of the Hollywood dream factory and its globalizing cultural influence, and one of the characters, who is a Canadian working in Beverly Hills in the 1920s, should make statements questioning Canadians' fragile grip on their own identity so as to draw an analogy with contemporary issues. I will have him say things like,

> Canada isn't a country at all, it's simply geography. There's no emotion there, not the kind Chance is talking about. There are no Whitmans, no Twains, no Cranes. Half the English Canadians wish they were *really* English, and the other half wish they were Americans. If you're going to be anything you've got to choose. Even Catholics don't regard Limbo as a permanent state.[22]

I also did not decide from the beginning that the novel had to deal with an obscure massacre of First Nations people that helped prompt the Macdonald government to form the North-West Mounted Police and march them west to lay claim to that part of Canada, or to choose to portray that as an act of imperial possession having inescapable consequences for the configuration of the country and for Aboriginal peoples, consequences with which we are still living. The book was not framed as an illustration of ideas; the ideas emerged in the writing of it. I assuredly did not say, I must write a historical novel; it is the duty of the moment. That is not the way writers of fiction work. But their convictions and beliefs do surface in their work, and the Canadian historical novel provides plenty of evidence that, if nothing else, an awareness exists among writers of fiction that Canadian history is an essential component of any formulation of Canadian identity, which is a radically different tactic from the approach of novelists who began to publish in the '60s, '70s, and '80s, but one which still circles the question of who we are as a people.

In the first half of the 20th century Canadian historians did the most to frame a sense of a provisional and hazardous English-speaking identity; the influence of Canadian fiction writers in that period was minimal, even negligible. In giving such weight to historical knowledge in creating a sense of ourselves, I am not invoking the dead hand of the past, or succumbing to a nostalgic yearning for

22. Guy Vanderhaeghe, *The Englishman's Boy* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1996), 181.

some *better time*. If nothing else, history is a reminder of change, fluidity, and mutability. When I entered grade 1, among the first educational tortures I was subjected to was creating a blueprint of the architecture of the Union Jack with a ruler and then colouring it with crayons. And God help anyone who got it wrong. As well, we six-year-olds were trooped off to the local movie theatre to see a film of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, a particularly bizarre school outing, since her ascension to the throne was not even a current event; her reign had begun four years before.

But things changed quickly. Within seven years the country was ensnared in the toils of the Great Flag Debate; soon the Canadian Red Ensign was consigned to the dustbin of history, and all my uncles who had fought under the old flag during World War II were in a rage because *their* flag had been taken from *them*. As a teenager, I regarded this as inexplicable behaviour. I wanted a new flag, a new logo. What I could not grasp was that my uncles felt their identity was being erased, an identity forged in battles in North Africa, Italy, and the Low Countries, an identity fashioned in exile from home and won at the cost of debilitating wounds and psychic shock. The past they had apprehended, taken custody of, was being wrenched out of their hands, and they were furious at having it torn from them.

But none of us, as much as we would like to, can own history. Nor can we fasten an English-speaking Canadian identity in one particular moment, immure it like a fly in amber. It is as changeable as quicksilver, mercurial. In my lifetime I have seen the institution of official bilingualism and multiculturalism, the patriation of the Constitution, the establishment of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms; all these renovations were once hotly debated, sometimes lamented, but now are, generally, accepted as cornerstones of the Canadian nation and Canadian identity.

But history also proclaims that earlier traces remain in these formulations, and that is why knowledge of the past is so important to

the life of the present. Every aspect of the work of historians takes on value seen in that light—the specialized studies that reveal bypassed incidents or aspirations that still glimmer faintly in the present, the overarching interpretations that touch on common experiences shared by Canadians of all kinds, and descriptions and that argue, maybe just maybe, amidst the welter of divisions there is a centre, and the centre just may hold. I pass over the complications in the relationship between English-speaking and French-speaking Canada because the subject is too vast for this talk and, frankly, beyond my limited knowledge to plumb—except to say that this is a fractious country, but not an entirely fractious country.

A Country of Ghosts

What role does the Canadian historical novel play in depicting English-speaking Canadian identity? It can do little of what the historian is capable of. Fiction writers have neither the command of facts nor the ambition necessary to attempt overarching interpretations. However, centuries ago, the Italian philosopher of history Giambattista Vico posited an idea earth-shaking for his time, a claim that history derived from humble human origins, not divine providence. Historical fiction, I believe, reinforces the sense that it *does* proceed from humble human origins. While the analytic, authoritative, omniscient voice of the historian can leave the impression that historical forces have the omnipotence of divine providence, Stegner's serial voices of fiction remind us that history is never as clear or simple for those who lived it as we might imagine. The lesson of the historical novel may be that the past was every bit as problematic as the present we are floundering through. The clamour of voices in the historical novel, all speaking their own brand of truth, may prompt in us the realization that our understanding of past and present is won by our own efforts, that these are subjects that we need to ponder and think through as individual citizens. *The*

Englishman's Boy contained a warning: Beware of anyone who hands you the past too neatly packaged in a history, in a documentary, in a historical movie, or perhaps most dangerously of all, in a historical novel. Test them all.

In an age in which mammoth bureaucracies, faceless corporations, unfettered financial institutions, and vague concepts such as globalization assume the robes of divine providence and act increasingly on the assumption that human beings are powerless to influence their own destinies or to assert their own identities, history and historical fiction may help provide a sober second voice that reminds us we live with the consequences of our own choices, our own actions, that we are responsible for and deserve the country we get. In an age when political discourse has become increasingly Manichaean, increasingly simplified and reductionist in outlook, to insist on the complexity of the past is to insist on the complexity of the present, a reminder that true cosmopolitanism not only recognizes and applauds difference in the present, but acknowledges it in the past.

Donald Creighton, the eminent and now distinctly unfashionable Canadian historian, once said, "History is the record of an encounter between character and circumstance… the encounter between character and circumstances is essentially a story."[23] History tells a different kind of story than fiction. The narrative of history emphasizes evidence, considered judgment, and measured interpretation. It speaks with a distant, reasoned, authoritative voice. Novelists speak a different language, more intimate and visceral. Alessandro Manzoni wrote that history gives us,

> Events, which, so to speak, are known only from the outside; what men have performed: but not what they have thought, the feelings which have accompanied their deliberations and their plans, their

23. John Robert Colombo, ed., *Colombo's Canadian Quotations* (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1974), 129.

> successes and their misfortunes: the conversations by which they have impressed or tried to impress their wills, by which they have expressed their anger, poured forth their grief, by which in a word, they have *revealed their individuality*: all this history passes by almost in silence; and all this is the domain of poetry.[24]

I do not claim one voice is better or more valuable than the other. Like the fable of the six blind men each touching a part of the elephant and drawing conclusions about what the elephant is from whatever they lay hands on, neither history nor the historical novel alone can do justice to the elephant that is the past. We need many and complementary stories. As a people, we not only locate ourselves in stories, we discover ourselves in them. No one can apprehend the past in the sense of taking custody of it; it is a common heritage, and also a country of ghosts. These ghosts walk among us. The more ghost stories we tell ourselves, of every kind and variety, the better we may come to understand who we are, and the less strange we Canadians may come to seem to one another's eyes.

24. Quoted in Georg Lukacs, *The Historical Novel*, 129.